

Take The Current When It Serves

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Take The Current When It Serves

by [StratsWrote](#), [whiskeyandspite](#)

Summary

Will's earliest memories tasted of salt water. He knew for a fact his last would be the same.

Will Graham is trying to make a living and trying to stay alive. A gay man married to his asexual best friend at the start of the nineteenth century, Will catches a break and finds himself and his wife work on the Campania, a steamship ferrying people between Liverpool and New York.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter is a man of privilege and passion, still close friends with his ex-wife, and a consultant for a lucrative new venture. Unable to fix up his little boat to head to New York on his own, he's advised by a grumpy boat mechanic to seek a ticket on the Campania instead.

This is a *very slow burn* story, we're talking they kiss at the end of this book. But we really hope you like it!

Notes

A lot of research went into this baby and we're more than happy to answer questions and send links to where we found it if you're curious!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

For as long as Will could remember, there had always been a boat.

He'd grown up surrounded by water. He'd learned to walk on the shifting, tilting decks. His father liked to joke that Will had wobbled on land, making up for the loss of the waves.

Will had a job before he could write his own name. He had callouses by the age of seven, from working whatever rigging his tiny hands could manage. His father had taught him his lessons, rather than send him to a school. Harrison Graham needed all hands on deck if he was going to keep their little family afloat.

They were fishermen, primarily, but eventually they'd expanded. Will was the best boat mechanic one could find in London's harbor, and his father eventually found partnership with another fisherman. They leased the boats, and Will repaired them when they returned from their voyage.

It was a humble life, but Will had never known anything else. It was impossible to miss something he'd never had. Besides, in order to miss something, one had to have the spare time to think about it. Will only stopped moving to eat or sleep. Every other moment was for the boats.

Or his dog.

Medic was a stunted approximation of a bull terrier. Will had found him as a pup struggling in the muck of the Thames. It wasn't uncommon for people to toss aside unwanted litters, and this pup seemed to have been the only one of his own to have made it.

Will had nursed him back to health, carried him in a sling on his chest as he continued to work, despite his father's assurances that the mutt wouldn't survive the summer.

Medic was four, now, and thriving.

Plus, he made a good name for himself along the docks by keeping the rodent population down. He also won favor with Harrison in that he earned his keep; Medic was paid for his work in scraps and treats and came home with a full round belly. He even joked that the dog lived better than the human Grahams did, some days.

Most of Will's days were spent out at sea, but there was still a small flat to come home to. It was sparsely furnished, but still cramped. Harrison slept on the sofa so that Will could have the one room with a door, and they worked around each other. Harrison insisted that Will needed the space more than he did.

And perhaps he did, in a technical sense. Even if his marital bed wasn't quite what his dad imagined it to be.

After Medic, Beverly Graham was the light of Will's life, if only because she had never expected more from him than he had to give. And what he had to give was very little at all. Certainly not *intimacy*.

"Making you lunch," Bev said. Will looked up from his tea, still half asleep. Her dark hair was tangled from sleep, falling in messy waves from where she'd tied it back the night before. One of Will's longer shirts hung off her shoulders down to her knees and the sleeves had been folded five times over to rest in a bunch at her elbows. She looked about as awake as he was.

"No need for you to be up this early." The sun hadn't yet risen, and Beverly wouldn't be out on the Nola with Will today.

"If I don't make you lunch, you won't eat," Bev said, placing a fond kiss on the top of his head.

"Lunch is an expense we don't need. Breakfast suits me just fine."

"When you eat it." Bev shot him a knowing look, heading back towards the bedroom.

Initially, they'd met because of work.

Will's dad fixed the boat Bev and her parents had come to England on, from the mainland.

"It's a miracle she made it," Harrison had told Bev's dad as he regarded the half-shattered little vessel and Bev translated what she could understand from the hand gestures. "It's a miracle y'all made it."

The docks had seen an influx of Russian Jews coming through in the 1880s, most came into one port and out through another, and Harrison found they were some of the most honest when it came to pay or barter. No one had it easy, but a Korean-Russian family that spoke Yiddish and little else had it harder than most.

Bev's parents had tried to pay with heirloom candlesticks, embroidered cloth, the clothes off their backs. Harrison had told them he'd fix up their boat and let them crash on the main room floor if they helped with some cooking and clean up. Will was a tot still, only seven, and when he wasn't able to join Harrison on the boats themselves he wasn't the best at keeping house. Besides, Harrison thought Will could use more of a feminine touch in his life; his mother had run off not long after Will had turned three, and Harrison was a gruff man by nature and necessity.

"Nosh and a good kip, that's what y'all need." Harrison had said, cutting all other bartering options off at the root.

Bev had gone by Beylke then, and the five-year-old and her mother made the flat look neater than it had ever been in all the time the Grahams had lived in it within the space of two days. Bev's dad helped Harrison with the repairs, and started to pick up some English that way, and Bev's mum found a way to turn what Will had thought were useless leftovers into entire meals. Strange jiggly jello with bits of meat in it made from chicken feet and leftover bones,

coffee ground from dried and toasted acorns, dandelion tea. She'd tell Will later, when language wasn't such a barrier, that coming from a land where hunger was the norm, one got creative. If it was edible, they'd find a way to eat it. If it wasn't, it just meant no one had tried to eat it yet.

They were meant to only stay until the boat was fixed, until they could turn her bow towards the hopes and dreams that lay over the horizon in America.

They ended up staying in London forever.

Will and Bev had grown up side by side, even when her family found a room and moved out a few months after effectively moving in. She'd been determined to befriend the weird wild-haired boy and was relentless in her pursuit. She borrowed Will's books, his clothes, his accent. By the time she was eleven, and Will thirteen, she had no accent whatsoever, and while Will remained home schooled his entire life, Bev had been sent to one of the schools in the city. She cut her teeth on playground bullies and ingrained racism well before any child her age should have.

Maybe that was why it had been her idea to get married when they hit 'that age', too.

"Look, you know Papa will find a goddamn matchmaker otherwise," she'd said, passing Will's cigarette back to him. They were staring out over the nighttime docks, a bottle of cheap wine stolen from Bev's house and a cigarette stolen from Will's. "Help me out here."

"A matchmaker would do better for you than I would." The wine was acrid, too-sweet. It did the job, though, which was to make them drunk enough to forget the day's aches.

Will was nineteen; Bev was seventeen. Together, they had a handful of shillings and a few more handfuls of secrets. Will could not have found a more suitable wife, and Bev turned heads wherever she went. She swore like a sailor and worked harder than most of them. She knew her way around a book as well as a boat, and the last thing she wanted was to be tied down by tradition.

"A matchmaker doesn't know me like you do." Bev stole the wine from Will's grasp, swallowing the last of it with a grimace.

"She'll know more men," Will said. "She might find you someone more well-off. Someone who could offer you a proper house. Maybe with a garden."

"She'd just as likely find me a drunkard," Bev argued, "or a guy three times my age who can't keep his fists to himself. Besides, I've no skill with plants, you know that."

"I'm not Jewish," Will pointed out, stubbing the cigarette out against the sole of his boot. He knew a fair bit more than most, from their shared childhood, but religion had never called to him, Judaism or otherwise.

"On anyone else, that might be a flaw, but Papa loves you," Bev reminded him. "Besides, you've had Shabbat with us often enough, you probably could lead the prayers."

She wasn't wrong. But Will's bilingual ability ended at holy day recitations and a colorful array of curse words in Yiddish he'd picked up from Bev's dad.

"I'm wasted as a husband. I'm out more than in. I burn every meal I cook. I--"

"*You* are the best friend I've ever had," Bev said firmly. "The *only* friend. And you won't ask to share my bed for more than sleep."

Will's cheeks burned, and it wasn't from the wine. He cleared his throat and fiddled with his hands, fingers calloused and dirty and too-dry from the salt water. Will's earliest memories tasted of salt water. He knew for a fact his last would be the same.

"You deserve a family--"

"I don't want one," Bev shrugged, shifting to sit closer to her friend, shoulder to shoulder. "Mama and Papa want me to have one, your dad probably wants grandbabies too. I've got enough family with my lot and yours."

Will swallowed and chewed the inside of his lip. There had been a brief period about a year before, when hormones had flooded through them both, where they'd wondered if they would work together sexually. There had been half-drunk fumbling and an awkward kiss and both had laughed it off as a failure.

And now...

"You'll be stuck with me," Will reminded her, unnecessarily. "Through my shitty moods, and bad weather, and slow business over winter, and--"

"I have been for years already, what else is new?"

Will sat quiet for a while longer, and Bev puffed out a breath through her nose, gently shoving her shoulder against his.

"You can sleep with whoever takes your fancy, Graham. I've got tough skin, won't take it personally."

Will blushed, somehow, even deeper, and shook his head. "I wasn't-- that's not--"

"That's exactly what it is," Bev countered. "You're worried you'll find someone you actually want to bed, and be too much of a gentleman to say so, and martyr your way through our married life together. Right?" Will swallowed. Bev hummed, victorious. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. If it's a girl, that's easy enough to work around. And if it's a guy--" Will almost choked on his own tongue. "Then I'm the perfect cover. Think about it."

Will had thought about it.

They announced their engagement to their families two days later, and were married under a canopy later that year. According to Bev's dad, who had hugged Will and cried for joy when the ceremony was over, Will was the only *goy* to have married a Jewish girl in seven generations of their family.

They were still married six years on.

Bev returned, now, carrying Medic in a fireman's carry, and grunted as she set the wiggling dog down. "If you're out on the water today, I get our son for transport help."

Medic scampered over to Will's chair, scurrying into his lap and knocking the breath from his belly. "Helping or hindering?" he asked, scratching behind the pup's ears. "Last time you had to fish the hammer out of the sea."

"He got over-excited," Bev said, turning to fetch her own cup of tea. "I promise to keep a better eye out for stray cats this time. Plus, I've got all the tools tied to my belt or Medic's vest, now."

"We can't afford to replace anything." Will sighed, rubbing his eyes.

Before their marriage, finances had been a source of minor irritation, but nothing that gave Will a pang of longing or regret.

Now, on the other hand, he was acutely aware of how little he had to provide for Bev, of how far they managed to stretch their meager supplies. Bev worked too, as much as a woman in London Harbor could manage, but Will still felt the weight of ignored responsibility on his shoulders. He was the man, he was the head of the household. He was supposed to bring in money and food and keep his wife comfortable. He was meant to be there to stand up for her when idiots started in on what a freak she was; a working woman, a cross dresser, a chink.

And yet, Bev still made him lunch. She brought in just as much money as he did, she hauled nets with him and Harrison and grew callouses of her own on hands that shouldn't have seen any. She shouted back in a colorful mix of three languages that she *wasn't fucking Chinese, ya knob*.

Will didn't deserve Bev, that much was clear. And she deserved so much better.

"Don't spoil my fun. Medic *loves* helping mama, don't you, boy?" Bev interrupted with a laugh. "Worst comes to it, I'll just dive down and retrieve whatever sinks. I'm a better swimmer than you are."

Happy to have the attention of his two favorite people, Medic gave a happy little wriggle that dug his paws right into Will's poor bladder.

"Oof, alright, stupid boy, you're with your mum today." He manhandled the dog to the floor and kissed the curve of his nose before making his way to the bathroom. He'd go out further than usual today and toss his nets there in hope of a good haul. His dad would chew him out later for going that far out on his own but... they needed the money. They needed the food.

By the time he returned to the main room, Bev was scratching Medic's belly as he lay sprawled in her lap. On the table was a wrapped up little square of wax paper, no doubt the last of their bread with hard-won butter within it for Will's lunch. She looked up when Will tugged her hair gently and kissed her cheek.

“Be careful.” She said.

“You too. Don’t lose a finger to the saw.”

Bev barked a laugh and narrowed her eyes at Will. “No sawing today, today we’re chopping wood.”

“Even safer,” Will winked and took his sou’wester down from its hook. “Tell dad I’ll be late, but I’ll have something.”

“You always do.” Bev reminded him softly. Will sighed, nodded, and shoved his feet into his boots.

He always did. He always had, for the last few years of their shared life together. He hoped he could keep that up, could do better, could somehow find a twenty-fifth hour in the day, but he knew in his heart that if they wanted some kind of life, any kind of life, it would have to be outside of London’s exorbitant rents.

Will was twenty-five and Bev twenty-three when an uncle of a friend of a friend mentioned to Harrison that with the popularity of pleasure liners, new ships were looking for crew out in Liverpool.

“All them fancy boats,” he said, as Harrison checked out his little vessel, “full’uh them rich folks with nothing better to spend their money on than being ferried back an’ forth between ‘ere an’ those Americas.”

Harrison asked how he knew, and the man explained that one of his drinking buddies was a coal shoveler on the *Lucania*. Harrison gave him a discount, and the man promised to put in a good word for Will over on the commercial docks.

When the opportunity presented itself, Will grabbed it with both hands and dug his nails in. He and Bev had left that very night, a bag of belongings each and Medic aboard the family’s oldest little fishing boat -- the only one they could spare -- on their way to Liverpool. Will had known that a lot of the navy boats were out that way, but war frightened him to his very core, and the idea of ending up on a ship that could take fire wasn’t an option. But pleasure vessels... those he’d never actually considered.

Will was hired as a carpenter aboard the *RMS Campania* -- the *Lucania*’s sister ship -- in the fall of 1897, two weeks after they’d berthed their little boat and made it their temporary home. He worked his hands to the bone, month on month off, as the liner ran her route from Liverpool to New York.

The first months were hard, he and Bev hadn’t actually been apart for longer than a week since they were kids, but the first paycheck had Will and Bev richer than they had ever been in London. They could afford to move out of the boat and rent a room above an inn, and Bev took a job as a maid for the landlords downstairs.

It wasn’t easy work. Will came home from his on-months only to set himself to work amongst the docks, repairing engines and sails until his fingers bled. Bev’s back and feet

were always aching when they met back in their room for the night, and even though the stories she told of the rowdy customers made them both ache with laughter, Will hated that she had to work there at all. Their rent included partaking in the breakfasts and dinners supplied for the inn's customers, but they still never seemed to stop moving. With single-minded determination, their savings built by the week, but in such small increments that they seemed never to increase at all.

If Will allowed himself to dream, it involved doing right by Bev. Having enough for a proper flat, something where the kitchen and the sitting area were separate, and the commode wasn't by the stove. Pulling enough in at the end of the month that she could stay home, like the wives of the Campania's passengers always did, feet kicked up and a book in her hand as she smoked fancy cigarettes.

She'd be bored to tears and back on the docks within the week, but at least Will would have given her the opportunity to relax. He'd be providing for her as a husband should.

Still, it was better. Better than shoving themselves into a tiny flat with Will's dad, better than starving when pay ran thin towards the end of the month Will was away at sea.

But the Campania herself...

Will couldn't stand most of the passengers. He resented their snobbery, their finery. The way their eyes shifted over him as though he wasn't there at all. Even those in second class looked at him like he was vermin. He wondered if any of them understood that without him, and the engineers, and the coal shovelers, their boat wouldn't be moving at all. Two thousand passengers relying on just over four hundred crew to keep them in their fantasies.

But he'd loved every single boat he'd ever worked on, and the Campania was no exception.

She was a twin-screw steamer and had some of the most advanced engines Will had ever seen. They were enormous, had their own compartments in case of a hull breach, and were truly a masterwork of engineering. Whenever Will had a spare moment, he would shadow the engineers, asking questions, offering input, sharing cigarettes as they looked down over the water frothed furiously by the propellers.

Within a year of his initial employment, Will was promoted to Ordinary Seaman and offered accommodation in steerage for his family. Bev was more than happy to relocate to the ship, and Medic was snuck on board beneath her jacket. It didn't take long for him to make himself known to the crew, however, and charm the bosun into allowing him to remain on board. As on the docks, he started to take care of the rodent problem, and was soon given a crew tag for his collar: Chief Ratter.

For several months, he outranked Will.

As Will earned the sea hours necessary to progress to Able Seaman, Bev started her own slow infiltration of the engineering department. She'd always been a quick study, and here she proved herself to the rough and unshaven sea dogs that worked the engines of the steamer they all called home. Officially, she became part of the crew just before the dawn of the new

century. Unofficially, she'd been the engineer's assistant from the moment she set foot in the boiler rooms.

Living on the water also had other advantages: namely, income. While they both served on the Campania for six months of the year -- three on sea, three on land -- they were provided with food and lodging, and every penny saved added up.

With careful planning, they secured a small flat in New York, kept another in Liverpool, and spent every second quarter as far from their families as they could get. For no other reason than to avoid endless questions about starting a family and settling down, now that Bev was 'getting on in years'.

"I'm twenty-six for Christ's sake," she muttered, tossing her cigarette overboard. Will playfully shoved his shoulder against hers.

"Practically dead then," he joked. "Soon you'll start forgetting your own name, confusing Medic with an actual infant."

"That's another thing," Bev replied, pointing deliberately with her finger. "I hate that they refuse to acknowledge our child. We have a son. He just happens to be a tub on four legs who drools when he's happy."

"Long as you love him," Will snorted, grinning when Bev laughed and pressed her forehead to his shoulder. They'd welcomed the new century on board the Campania with the crew, and life was good. Life was very good, but it could be better. Will sucked his lip into his mouth. "I was thinking of putting myself forward for quartermaster now that Jenkins has retired."

"Good," Bev stretched her arms over her head with a delicious groan. "Do it."

"That'll mean we're on the sea more than we're off it," Will reminded her. "The QM is on almost every voyage."

"Yeah?" Bev raised her eyebrows, feigning surprise. "Tell me something I don't know."

And so at twenty-eight, Will had applied for the position.

There was just something to sailing. It sank under Will's skin. Saltwater ran through his veins. There was a peace and freedom to his life on the Campania-- difficult though it was-- that could not be found on land. Even New York, as far from the pressures of their family as possible, was not far enough. Sure, the city moved and breathed and screamed in its own way, but it was only with the rocking of the waves beneath his feet, nothing but blue on the horizon, that Will finally could let himself relax.

He moved without needing to think. He performed his duties with little real effort required, the ship falling into obedience beneath his fingertips. He received his promotion to QM. The crew trusted him, relied upon him. Will knew every name of every crew member, from the captain all the way down to the younger O'Malley in the engine room, the lowest on the totem pole. He even knew the maid staff, and had coaxed them out of more than one extra dessert for Bev in the past, in exchange for cuddle time with Medic.

By late spring of 1903, Will had shed both blood and tears for the Campania, and not a soul alive knew it better than he did, he was certain. He was well on his way to achieving the settled life he'd imagined for Bev, either in a little townhome or on a boat of their own. A few more years and they could stop the crazy schedule, return to three months on sea and three on land, get another dog, maybe.

Anything was possible.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hannibal had been as guarded in his regard as he had his words, attachment and emotion walled away for many years. Bedelia did not change that, not quite, but she brought a refreshing breeze to his life where there had not been one before...a gentle push against the veil. What existed between them was neither frenzied passion nor romantic love, a mutual pragmatism, but they fit together like a well ordered china set: practical, purposeful, and with shared aesthetics.

We meet Hannibal...

Chapter Notes

We have been so lucky to snag the editor of editors, the beta of betas, Tali. Find our dear friend online as [helterskelter](#) on AO3 and as [NightmareTali](#) on Twitter.

Hannibal Lecter was a man of patience, poise...and few words. He'd learned at a young age that what was said could only get a man so far; actions were the making of a man in the end. This, perhaps, was what underpinned his preference of address: Although a Count by name and right, Hannibal Lecter preferred to be known as Doctor.

"The latter I have earned through tears and toil," he would respond when people inquired - for there were always those who would inquire - tilting his head just so, "The former a gift I never asked for."

And in truth, there were few things in life that Hannibal asked for. Where possible he preferred to earn them for himself - and one would learn that there was little not possible for the esteemed doctor. Those instances when he found himself unable were the same which led him to the dark confines of brooding and pensive hours, isolating himself until the solution could be found, turned over again and again in the shrewdness of the anatomically inclined mind.

People often fell into this category.

Human beings were fundamentally flawed creatures, and while Hannibal certainly counted himself among them, his frustrations grew when others didn't seem to be as ardently set towards bettering themselves or fostering their ambitions as he was so inclined.

One of the many reasons he had found himself at odds with his now departed uncle.

Once Hannibal had outgrown the polite age for familial gratitude - around the time he was sixteen - he'd found the elder man intolerable. His uncle had inherited a title, wealth, and land - and yet for all this seemed to want nothing more than to remain where he was. He called it 'a comfortable living'. Hannibal himself had several other choice words for it, 'sloth' was perhaps the kindest.

"You misinterpret kindness as laziness," his uncle had chided him once, when Hannibal had been up in arms, yet again, that his pursuits were fruitless, far be it to expect a peer to pursue a career, but the perverse enjoyment and abuse of privilege to be found in collecting an immense library only for show, not reading, was beyond the pale. "I am living a life granted to me by the sacrifices of others. I am acting as they would have wished me to - living free and unencumbered."

"My father wanted more than this," Hannibal had insisted. His uncle merely shrugged, adjusting his pince nez.

"Perhaps for you. He said little enough to me when we were children for me to possibly guess at his intentions for *my* future."

Hannibal had marched out of the room, hands clenched at his sides betraying his ire. For two years he worked more diligently in his education than he had ever before and, upon his graduation, left the family estate without so much as a backwards glance, catching a train to Scotland.

Your uncle despairs, Hannibal's aunt wrote. The rift between you grows as vast as the distance between you now.

Hannibal very much doubted his uncle despaired of anything. In the weeks before Hannibal left, on the few occasions they could stomach being in the same room together, his uncle had all but admitted he'd be relieved to finally see the back of him.

But Lady Murasaki despaired, and her letters frequently entreated Hannibal to write to his uncle, to return, to make amends. He never did, though he sent his *oba-san* missives by the fistful.

In Scotland, there were patients aplenty. Hannibal apprenticed with an established doctor, first, and then rented his own modest office on a busy street outside of the closes, sandwiched between a flower shop and a tiny grocers. He pressed blooms between pages and sent them off to his lady aunt whenever the mood struck him.

Edinburgh was a city of discoveries for Hannibal. He explored the restaurants and gardens the city seemed all too eager to offer up. He poured his passion into his hobbies and his work in equal measure, cultivating his skills in the arts as well as his surgical remedies. He attended lectures at the university as often as he was able, taking the time to speak to the invited guests of the lecturers after. There was more than one occasion on which he would find himself at a table with an established physician, talking late into the night over a glass of whiskey near a fire at one of the pubs frequented by members of the Royal College.

Hannibal had gone into medicine as much for the prestige as for the insatiable, bone-deep desire to *know* , to *solve*... to help. To remedy *now* what he couldn't help before, to do so *better* than those before him. Hannibal had poured over copies of The Canon of Medicine, he'd spent man hours parsing The Book of Healing, despite its outdated teachings, wringing from it what he could and what others so oft ignored. Medical journals were consumed with all the rest. He devoured knowledge without sight to what he was seeking, only the certainty that he had not found it yet, in any text, in any patient, new or ancient.

Dr. Lister had caught his attention with his lectures on pain relief, the concept and practice easing the suffering of a person as they were healed. Hannibal had been astounded by Lister's retelling of surgery while a person was still conscious, where they claimed to feel no pain while blood poured from them and needles stitched their skin closed. He had attended with rapt attention every one of his lectures and public talks after that, unslaked appetite all the more voracious for each new scrap of insight and data to be plucked from the surgeon's table.

By the end of the 1880s Hannibal had more patients than he could realistically attend to. Word of mouth from older patrons had garnered him clients from extended family and from those others in turn. He was known for his compassion, for his humor, for his bedside manner. He was known, also, for his ability to hurt in the name of healing, and have the patient feel no fear or pain. Yet, for all this, he was still no closer to that unknowable prize that his eager mind sought making whole each new body - or making modifications when wholeness could not be restored.

On advice of his colleagues and Dr. Lister himself, Hannibal left what had been the birthplace of this new self and set out to travel, enticed by the world's offerings - a veritable smorgasbord of the wounded, the ailing, the tantalizing curiosity of the 'incurable' and the *new* .

"Gather life experience," one of his professors told him, clapping Hannibal on the shoulder, "It will take you further than anything you will find in books, my boy."

And so, Hannibal had gone.

In England, Hannibal found libraries that captivated him, a storied history that spanned centuries. In Italy, food and art. He spent hours observing the galleries, the catacombs, the architecture, sketching out rough copies of their beauty, their *embodiment* .

Hannibal discovered a skill with charcoals, his fingertips stained black as lines of precision bloomed after hours of toil. Yet for all its beauty, it was not this which captured him, but the culinary arts .

In Britain, he'd studied medicine, trailed the paths of surgical expertise. In Italy, Hannibal shadowed chefs, his motions growing smoother with practice as surely as they had with scalpel as with chef's blade.

He'd known true hunger, once. It had rent at his innards, wrung his belly out until with merciless claws and a cure so obvious yet so unattainable. Starvation was a slow death, prolonged all the more and alleviated none by the scraps one found to nibble at. Blizzards

had swept over all, woods frozen over in their wake. All the wealth in the world could not have bought them food that winter, not with the paths barred to them.

And eventually, the vultures had come to call, and the scraps had run out, greedily gulleeted by those carrion caricatures of men.

Hannibal had never sought to overcompensate for that moment, to do so would be to acknowledge its lingering grasp. When he'd been brought into his Uncle's household, he'd understood there would be plenty of food to spare. On occasion, however rarely, in those early years, he had squirreled something away in his room, to bring him respite when nightmares held sleep hostage and whispered the echo of cold into his bones, but Hannibal had not developed the unseemly habits some starved children tended to.

In Lithuania and then Scotland, food had been functional, necessary nourishment. But in Italy, Hannibal discovered elegance.

In his dishes he cultivated the drama of the opera, the vibrancy of the Renaissance Masters. His command of spices, the subtle gradient of flavour from course to course balanced with the boldness of each individual dish won him praise and favour. When he left Italy, Hannibal took with him a full sketchpad and a lifetime's appreciation for the wonders of the palette in every sense.

In Paris, Hannibal found Bedelia.

It was her deportment that first caught Hannibal's attention; her steps falling one after another like an empress in a world that no longer recognized her as such. Her posture, her bearing, her stern gaze when it had slid over Hannibal and away again; he was enraptured.

She was older than him, though not by much, and seemed to care little for that when presented with the attention of another who walked the world of fallen kingdoms, who could not only entertain her as the frivolous youths of France could not, but edify her with his company and conversation. They met regularly at a cafe near the Louvre, where she worked, and spoke about everything and nothing at all. Some days they sat in silence, each immersed in a book or a sketch, simply basking in the mutuality of another mind so engrossed.

Hannibal had been as guarded in his regard as he had his words, attachment and emotion walled away for many years. Bedelia did not change that, not quite, but she brought a refreshing breeze to his life where there had not been one before...a gentle push against the veil. What existed between them was neither frenzied passion nor romantic love, a mutual pragmatism, but they fit together like a well ordered china set: practical, purposeful, and with shared aesthetics. For the first time since his childhood, Hannibal was content.

He asked her to marry him in the summer of 1886. They were wed that same autumn - an expedience that could be swept under the guise of Parisian romance. They were in agreement that theirs was an arrangement of practicality, a solidification of their friendship.

Married life brought with it new fascinations and experiences that Hannibal had never before considered necessary for his life; a shared home, near-constant companionship. Intimacy was a curious thing between them. Hannibal had never met a woman who knew her worth so

much as Bedelia did, had never met a lover so invested in their lovemaking as he was. They were never so unmatched as when they united.

Hannibal offered his services at the ever growing hospitals and clinics in the city, while Bedelia remained at the museum, curating and obtaining ever more new and extraordinary things. For a time, all was well. All was settled. *Comfortable*. Hannibal had achieved what he supposed any young man his age aspired to before the age of thirty; he was married, he had a stable home, his career was successful and rife with innovation, his mind engaged, and yet...

That other hunger persisted, promised him in its incessant lure that there was more ahead; so much else to be seen and discovered and enjoyed.

"You've been listless, darling," Bedelia noted one night, her stocking clad feet curled up beneath her, a glass of wine in her hand. No question, no accusation, simply the cool observation of fact that would be no more out of place in an interpretation of the Dutch Masters than their home, nor indeed his own diagnosis of a patient. She'd let her hair down, but otherwise looked as perfectly poised as she had when she went out the door that morning. She had an enviable and effortless grace to her, a surety that Hannibal had once thought he himself possessed.

Now, he felt unfinished, a neglected draft work.

"Perhaps I should take up a hobby," Hannibal mused, nursing his own wine, "Gardening."

"Or women," Bedelia suggested, her softly coy smile pearl-bright in their dim sitting room. She had more of a fondness for affairs than Hannibal did. He'd had lovers for a night, once or twice, but he usually found his needs adequately satisfied between Bedelia and his practice.

And yet...

That night they'd been tender, almost loving, in their own way. But Hannibal lay awake afterwards, feeling that tug of fate, the twisting churn of incompleteness.

He took time from work, citing a need to concentrate on his own health, and journeyed to Mont Martre.

He had been there many times, of course, it was within walking distance of one of the offices he gave his time to, but he'd never really allowed himself to experience the place beyond its veneer of kitschy cafes and crooked lanes. And he'd never been after nightfall, when the area came alive with its own boisterous spirit.

It called to the artist in him to spend the day observing and the night participating.

The first evening, Hannibal found himself at the *Lapin Agile*, nursing a glass of absinthe and conversing with anyone who showed interest. He learned of forbidden places and the power of the Green Fairy. He learned of the pacts made between young men and their older counterparts, of the places women ruled and men obeyed, of the places sin was welcome rather than shunned.

The next day, hardly awake yet youthfully invigorated by the novelty of his discoveries, Hannibal spent his hours at the *Place du Tertre*, sketching, smoking, filling his soul with black coffee and the whitest of cream cakes. He felt purified here, as though those unfinished parts that so lamented in the quiet and routine were seeds about to burst forth from their confines in new life.

He indulged himself, napping on a bench in the sun, and woke to a rose by his head, left by some kind passerby who hadn't disturbed him or his sketchbook, and hadn't liberated his wallet from his person. There were more minute fancies to be indulged too. Hannibal found a kitschy postcard, and on a whim addressed it to the home he shared with Bedelia. He bought another and sent it to his *oba-san*, delighting in the knowledge that his uncle wouldn't be able to read the missive; he'd never put in the effort to learn Japanese beyond speaking and understanding.

That night, he kissed a beautiful boy up against the faded wall of *La Petite Chaumiere* and felt alive for the first time in decades.

Boys, as it turned out, were a completely different flavour. It wasn't that Hannibal's experiences with women had been lacking, simply that these new experiences now transcended that. If Bedelia was a warm spring day, comforting and pleasant, the men Hannibal met in dark rooms were scorching summer, blazing hot, burning his skin, Ichareon in the heat of their transgressions.

They tasted like liquor and mischief. Hannibal developed an appetite for the pretty ones, sweet and youthful - or at least the appearance of it. They tugged at something in him, a long-buried need to care, to coddle and comfort.

Hannibal lost the last remnants of 'innocence' that might yet have clung to him in a boarding house with a landlord who pretended not to see them tripping up the stairs. There was an excitement bubbling under his skin, yearning to get out.

He stayed two weeks and remembered only half his time there. He left sore...and satiated.

The home he'd come to keep still comforted him upon his return, now though a muted kind of respite, the clarity of its illusion revealed now that he had sampled the genuine. Hannibal had no desire to live the rest of his life as he had in Mont Martre, inebriated and half-aware, but there were certain yearnings which had trailed him home. Cravings for those foreign spices that would rebel against the usual fare and demand their own satiation instead.

Bedelia took in all with a knowing look when he returned, one eyebrow raised, "Did you find your hobby, then?"

"Did you get the postcard?" Hannibal asked in turn, taking a deliberate sip of his wine. Her smile was answer enough.

And so it went for them.

They remained legally married, neither offended by the other's dalliances so long as they could have their own. And they did value each other's companionship, still, truly. Still the

only ones suited to outlast the uncountable and brief infatuations. Some nights they spent in bed together, learning the other's body as though for the first time, some mornings they slept late, Hannibal beneath the covers bringing Bedelia to groaning pleasure between her legs.

They were happy.

They celebrated their anniversary in Berlin, where Hannibal also attended the Tenth International Medical Congress. They frequented fashionable (and occasionally less than reputable) restaurants together, and left apart, but never alone. There were times too when they found someone who caught both of their fancy and invited them to their bed to indulge together. They explored the city's museums hand in hand, Bedelia regaling Hannibal about the history of one painter or another, the era one statue was scandalous in and why. They tried new substances together, things Hannibal had read about and always tried on himself first before offering to his wife.

Ostensibly, they agreed, giggling and giddy one evening, it was research. Sometimes Bedelia even joined Hannibal at the Congress lectures.

Back in France, their lives continued. They were young and beautiful and free. In Bedelia, Hannibal found a friend. A best friend...a partner, but not the right sort. Together, they spoke and drank and played, they sought advice, they found consolation. For a time, it was enough.

In the young men in *La Clair de Lune* and *La Petite Chaumiere*, Hannibal found someone to care for, for a night. Someone to coddle and spoil. He was a regular, now, for several of them, and they greeted him with open arms, affectionately calling to their friends that their Daddy had come to stay.

Neither he nor Bedelia wanted children, and neither spoke to or about their families enough to feel pressure from them to procreate. Yet Hannibal found his desire to protect, to love, to treasure someone sated with these young men as it never was with Bedelia; she didn't need protecting, and understood love on a different level. By all considerations, she was the protector, and Hannibal indulged her in that as often as he was able.

They had their own travels, as well. Hannibal returned to his uncle's home just the once, to bury him, and never again. Bedelia ventured to the Netherlands to procure new paintings.

It was from the Netherlands that she sent her letter. In it, she invited Hannibal to make the journey to meet her.

I know how fond you are of new advancements, she wrote. A new market is blooming around pain relief. Your patients would thank you.

Fond as Hannibal was of his patients, he knew it was really his own curiosity he would be sating. Hannibal had followed every medical advancement he could, absorbing a wealth of knowledge that even he could not practically apply in a lifetime. Which did little to stop him trying.

In the Netherlands, though, Hannibal found a new venture and fixation. Bedelia had learned of the drug through a museum patron, and he in turn introduced it to Hannibal.

Cocaine reminded Hannibal of nights spent in dark rooms with absinthe. Bitter on his tongue, leaving a rush of excitement in his veins. And its benefits as an anesthetic could not be understated. Hannibal had tried the drug in Berlin, it had been barely a mention at the Congress, but a stallholder had caught his attention, explained the process and the properties. He had given Hannibal a card. *Koloniale Bank* .

It felt like fate, finally, stars aligning towards that purpose they had been calling him to for years. So when Bedelia returned to France, Hannibal didn't. They greeted the dawn of the new century countries apart, looking at the same moon.

1900.

A date almost entirely unbelievable, a surreality about its very marking. Hannibal felt opportunity alight in the pit of his stomach, inviting and intoxicating. Once more anything was possible, a feeling that had only existed in fleeting moments since his youth; Science was once again taking up its rightful place alongside magic. Things not even conceivable two decades before were reality, commonplace even, and Hannibal himself standing upon the precipice of greatness, a yawning chasm of possibility so much more than himself.

Hannibal kept in contact with Bedelia's patron from the Netherlands, an older gentleman who had had stocks in the Dutch East Indies for years. They had dinner often, shared drinks. He introduced Hannibal to his colleagues, his contemporaries, his friends - many of whom were also reaping the rewards of the popularity of the Coca plant in Europe. While they enjoyed it recreationally, Hannibal studied them at a distance, taking notes.

He felt like he was in university again, he felt like a teenager before his first kiss.

When the Koloniale Bank opened up the Nederlandsche Cocaïnefabriek in March, Hannibal wasted no time investing in the project and offered his services as a consultant as well as a physician pioneering the use of the drug in practice. He spent a year in the Netherlands before he was told his influence and expertise would be better serving the *fabriek* in England, where medicine hadn't progressed as quickly as it had on the mainland.

Hannibal agreed, albeit reluctantly, and in 1902 relocated to London, refusing to use the inheritance unenthusiastically left to him by his uncle until absolutely necessary. Besides, it was the first time his aunt had the full run of the house and finances without a man dictating her every move; she deserved the freedom without her adopted nephew in the way. Though, he did visit more often, now that he was closer.

He wrote Bedelia often, and then less. In the fall of 1902, she wrote,

*Though our time together has been some of the happiest of my life, I find myself on the precipice of a new venture. Once, we agreed that our marriage would last as long as it benefited us both. With you abroad and having found new love in your practice, and myself, home, and in love with **him** , it seems the mutual benefits of our partnership have come to an end. I release you from your duty to me and request that you do the same.*

I hope, however, that you will continue to write.

Hannibal returned to France for the span of one week. The proceedings prior to this had been officious and, mercifully, attended to by Bedelia. He signed his divorce papers on a Monday and signed as a witness to Bedelia's nuptials on the same Thursday. When she saw him off at the channel, she kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear.

"Find what makes you ache, Hannibal, and don't let go."

The words echoed in his mind on his way home. For several nights they kept him awake.

In England he started his own practice and, having acquired a reputation for 'painless' medicine, quickly had a full calendar of appointments. And while he was exhausted, he didn't ache.

He visited mollyhouses, he found new young men to love and coddle, but he didn't ache.

He wrote to Bedelia, delighted in her adventures around the world with her new husband, pinned her postcards to his door, and kept her letters in an old hat box of hers beneath the bed. He missed her, but he didn't ache.

When he was asked if he would like to undertake a month-long research venture across the Atlantic, Hannibal packed his bags before he called his patients to arrange alternate care and appointments. Perhaps he simply needed to free himself of the perpetual fog of London, it had always stifled him. Perhaps he needed to see the world once more, rather than just reading about it, artists fingers tracing the well worn sketches of his youth.

Certainty escaped him.

What did not was that this - this planning of a trip, on a boat that hadn't seen the sea for years, for a research venture with no guarantee of fruitfulness and only the coy call of exploration, made him feel like he felt in Mont Martre. Not quite an ache yet, anticipation certainly, but in that a promise.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's eyes found him, even amongst the crowd. Sometimes he saw him while walking the docks; other times he spotted Will from the deck of his own vessel.

Most days, Will carried a heavy layer of grime, skin stained with oil, hair slicked back with sweat. He moved briskly, as though the day might get away from him if he delayed too much.

Will didn't hear the call at first. Admittedly, he was elbow-deep in the guts of an engine at the time, enjoying the last few weeks of his landbound leave. In truth, it only caught his attention at all because Medic had wriggled out from his companionable spot at Will's side and bounded up the stairs to greet the visitor with a resounding bark.

It wasn't Bev, because Bev wouldn't have bothered announcing her presence, she'd have just come down and joined him. Besides, Bev was home and in bed, exhausted and sore and curled around a warmed towel as her stomach cramped and ached. Will had promised to come back with her favourite cream cake later that day and left her to it; he'd learned early on in their marriage that during her monthly bleeding Bev preferred to be left alone, and as there was nothing Will could do to help her, he usually kept himself busy.

His latest project had been to rebuild their little fishing boat into a quaint houseboat to sell, a profitable excuse for what would have occupied him regardless, as more and more people had begun to show interest in pleasure vessels of late.

Interrupted, he cursed and grabbed the nearest rag to wipe the worst of the oil off his fingers and followed his dog back up on deck.

Medic was standing with back feet planted on the boat and front paws up against the well-tailored pant legs of a man Will had never seen before. He was dressed like one of Will's passengers rather than someone of Will's class, but he was allowing Medic to sniff and lick his hand without grimacing in disgust, which was sign enough that Will could give him the time of day, if nothing else.

"Medic, down," Will clicked his fingers and the rotund little beast immediately backed off, moving to sprawl against Will's leg instead, "Can I help you?"

The man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping his hand without any visible displeasure. "Are you Mr. Graham?" He asked, offering a smile that was perhaps meant to be charming.

Will folded his arms across his chest, eyes narrowing. Fancy suit and shiny shoes on a Liverpool dock, looking for Will? A debt collector, perhaps, or something equally unpleasant. Will had nothing he owed, that he could recall. At least nothing that was overdue. Perhaps Will's father had given his name and simply not been able to alert Will yet; he knew Will was more than happy to offer him whatever help he could afford (albeit not much, but he did his best).

He'd never taken Will up on the offer, though. Debt collector: unlikely.

A magistrate, then. Or someone who coveted the part of the dock Will leased; whichever the case, he wouldn't be the first to offer politely-worded threats.

"Who's asking?"

The man frowned, brow furrowed.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter," he said, extending a hand.

Will looked at it, lifted his own to show how dirty they were, and when the man didn't immediately retract his hand, reached out to clasp it in a brief shake.

"I can't imagine I'm in need of a doctor," Will replied, pushing his hands into his pockets. The man's lips ticked up in a smile again and he tilted his head.

"Glad to hear it," he said, "But in this regard I'm in need of your services, rather than you of mine."

Will blinked, "I don't follow."

"I was told that you are an exceptional mechanic," the doctor replied, "That you have golden hands, an immaculate reputation with machines, and that I would find you where the Nola was berthed."

Will exhaled through his nose, swallowing down a retort that quickly found its way to the back of his throat. He wasn't like that anymore. He was *cultured* and educated in the ways of class communication. *The Campania* had taught him more than just hands on skills.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," Will said after a moment, keeping his tone even. The man blinked again, slowly.

"Are you not Mr. Graham?"

"I am he," Will agreed, "but I'm afraid I can't help you."

"I assure you, Mr. Graham, I am more than willing to pay the fee for your services."

Will tried not to wince. Certainly, they could use the money. They could *always* use the money. But Will was tired. He was tired of men like Doctor Lecter thinking they could buy his time, like every spare minute Will had wasn't precious, like he didn't have his own things to do. He was tired of fixing other people's messes. Men like this never knew how to care for

the ships they boasted about. They never treated them right, they were always back the next month for another set of repairs.

“Not interested,” Will said, turning back towards his boat, “Get off my boat.”

He could hear a sharp inhalation behind him. He ignored it, patting his thigh to summon Medic.

“It’s a wonder you’ve had any customers at all with an attitude like that.”

Will whirled on him, eyes narrowed, “Correct me if I’m mistaken, *Doctor*, but *you’re* the one who marched on up onto *my* boat without invitation.”

The doctor was momentarily taken aback, staring at Will in surprise. By the time he recovered himself, Will set his feet and repeated. “Get off my boat, *sir*; if you would. I’ve no interest in your business.”

The doctor looked like he might argue, like he might try to assert himself further. But perhaps the look on Will’s face was enough to deter him, certainly Medic wasn’t contributing with his lolling tongue and gleeful puppy grin. He cleared his throat and made a show of stepping back onto the dock from Will’s little fishing vessel.

“Perhaps I caught you at the wrong time,” the man offered - without an apology, Will noted. Will said nothing to this, and watched as the man adjusted his jacket as he turned to walk away, polished shoes clicking against the age-softened wood of the dock.

“What a prick,” Will muttered, whistling for Medic to follow him below decks again.

Hannibal was not a man who was easily cowed. His interaction with Mr. Graham had been far from pleasant, but it was certainly not the worst he’d had to put up with in his life.

The man had come highly recommended, and Hannibal’s boat needed to be seaworthy if he was to undertake the voyage on his own. He brushed off their initial conversation as a bad mood, and a misstep on his own part; perhaps he shouldn’t have so presumptively boarded the deck without invitation, but he had been calling from the dock without an answer.

He would try again the next day, and later in the afternoon, ensuring that Mr. Graham had time to think about the offer without rejecting it outright.

As it would turn out, Mr. Graham was as stubborn as he was talented, if the recommendations were to be believed on the latter score.

“Feeding my dog won’t get me to work for you,” Will pointed out, not stopping his animal from taking the treat Hannibal had brought him, but also not looking up from the mess of cogs and bolts he’d been sorting. He was black from fingertips to mid forearm, and his overalls were tied around his waist by the arms.

“I wanted to apologise for my conduct,” Hannibal said, “It was wrong of me to set foot aboard your boat without permission.”

Will snorted, “Yes, it was. Still doesn’t mean I’ll take the job.”

“You don’t even know what I’m asking for.”

“Work,” Will said, “My time, which is limited enough as it is.”

“I would compensate you,” Hannibal reminded him. He crouched down in his ridiculous suit, allowing Medic to paw happily at him as he pet behind his ears, “I’m sure I could match whatever your regular salary is, more so if necessary.”

Will snorted, rolling his eyes. He folded his arms over his chest, meeting Hannibal’s infuriatingly peaceful stare, “Am I meant to be impressed by you throwing your money around like midday rain?”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. Will wondered if anyone had ever properly called him out on the way he tried to buy his way through life, or if they had all merely accepted his bribery.

“Not impressed,” Hannibal said slowly, “but I had hoped for amiable. I’ve walked up and down this dock and I’ve yet to find a mechanic praised half as highly as you.”

“Flattery, regardless of the cliché, doesn’t get you everywhere,” Will pointed out.

“I need to get to America,” Hannibal replied. Will shrugged.

“Flattery will absolutely not get you *there*. ”

“Are you always so rude to customers?”

“You’re not,” Will pointed out, “a customer. In fact, no one is. I’m a mechanic on the docks in name only.”

“How do you earn a living?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“I’m--” Hannibal held his breath and bit his tongue. Clearly this wasn’t unfolding the way he had expected it to. This man, this *Will Graham*, wouldn’t fix Hannibal’s boat. Perhaps he was able and good, but he was certainly not willing. Hannibal would not debase himself further by grovelling.

He sighed, tilting his head in a show of surrender, and pushing himself to stand again, “Can you recommend another mechanic of decent repute?”

“Depends what you want done,” Will shrugged. “If it’s merely the motor, Brown on berth seventeen knows his way around an engine. If it’s structural, I’d try Hobbs and Sons further inland. If it’s remodelling,” Will pursed his lips, showing just what he thought of the very idea. “I’m afraid Liverpool isn’t the dock you need.”

“I see.”

“If all you need is to get to America,” Will added, clicking his fingers to summon his dog back to his side, “I’d suggest just buying a ticket. You’ve clearly the means to.”

“I’d hoped to make the journey under my own power,” Hannibal admitted. Will couldn’t hold back his skeptical snickering at that.

“Do you even know how to navigate?” Will shook his head, “The Atlantic isn’t like the Channel. Or - or like cruising along the bay with ladies and wine.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed. “You mock me,” he said, “And you make assumptions that are completely unfounded.”

“You’d be dead in a week,” Will told him, “The sea is not your friend. Beautiful, she may be, but also violent and ill-tempered. If the waves didn’t get to you, the storms would. If not the storms, your own hubris. It all looks the same out there, to the unpracticed, and I doubt you’d know what a sextant was if I showed you one.”

“You don’t know that I haven’t sailed before.”

“You haven’t,” Will said, with rock-solid confidence, “Not any distance that mattered. If you had properly captained your vessel, you’d have some idea how to fix it.”

Hannibal gave him a long, searching look. Will held his ground, though the intensity of the doctor’s gaze made him uneasy.

“I don’t suppose you have a recommendation?”

“Can’t go wrong with the White Star Line,” Will said. “Ask about for the *Celtic* ; they have a direct route to New York City, and they’re due back in port any day now.”

Hannibal hummed, the only sound he made to suggest he understood, before nodding. “Much obliged.”

“Safe travels,” was all Will said before turning away.

Hannibal did ask about the *Celtic* , and while accommodations were far from wanting, something tugged at Hannibal to consider another vessel. It wasn’t a bad feeling per se, but he was used to following instinct. Trusting this, he instead booked himself passage on the *Campania* .

She was due in port a week after the *Celtic* , but was known to cross the ocean faster; she would gain several days on her sister ship on the open water.

In the time he had, Hannibal did seek out the recommended men to fix up his own little boat. Now that he had no pressing need to get her seaworthy, he could consider appointing several people to fix her while he was abroad.

To this end, he contacted his insurance and employed a trusted friend to watch over the work done on his boat while he was away. He took his time enjoying what little could be enjoyed

of Liverpool.

Inarguably, the port was bustling. While not accommodating to the sort of comforts Hannibal had grown accustomed to, it was far from displeasing. He'd seen ports in far worse condition in his travels. Amusingly, he saw Mr. Graham in passing more times than he could care to count. They never spoke again, and more often than not Will didn't even see Hannibal, too busy with his task to pay his surroundings much mind, but there he was nevertheless.

Hannibal watched his interactions, the way he clearly had preferences for people he spoke with; his entire demeanor changed, the familiar opened him up like a flower. He *smiled* instead of scowling. He was a handsome man, Hannibal had known that since the first time they'd met, but watching him relax was something almost intimate. There was a part of Hannibal that regretted that their interaction had gone so poorly, and that he would never see the man again once he left for New York.

There was a certain draw to Will Graham. Certainly, no one else had ever spoken to Hannibal in quite the same manner. Even when dressed down, Hannibal had come to expect a certain amount of respectfulness from those around him; from shopkeepers to academic peers, Hannibal had always kept a more mindful company.

Perhaps there was some truth to the way Will spoke to him, to his hesitance. Hannibal knew he looked a sight on the docks, dressed in his suit and tie while those around him wore stained overalls and frayed sleeves. There was a certain animosity inherent to class disparities, and he could not begrudge Will that.

And yet.

Hannibal's eyes found him, even amongst the crowd. Sometimes he saw him while walking the docks; other times he spotted Will from the deck of his own vessel.

Most days, Will carried a heavy layer of grime, skin stained with oil, hair slicked back with sweat. He moved briskly, as though the day might get away from him if he delayed too much.

Eventually, though, there was a change. A few days before the *Campania* was to depart, a clean-shaven man in a crisply ironed shirt nearly bumped into Hannibal as he passed. It was only when the dog went barreling after him that Hannibal realized he'd seen Will Graham once more.

He was stunned for a moment, struck dumb. Perhaps he'd mistaken him for someone else. Perhaps he had a brother. But no, the next day Hannibal saw the man again and it was, indeed, Mr. Graham; hair trimmed and combed, a bare shadow against his jaw suggesting the recent shave. He was at the market that Hannibal had frequented as he waited for his departure, purchasing bags of fresh fruit that he then tied to his dog's vest for him to carry through the crowd.

The day before the *Campania* was to sail, Hannibal saw Will with a young woman, her hair so black it was almost blue, features sharp and clever. She wore men's overalls and heavy boots, and hung on Will's arm as they walked step in step by the water. Both were smiling,

laughing even. Hannibal had not seen a band on Will's finger, but perhaps it wasn't an expense he'd seen fit to make. His partner wore a ring, and their closeness suggested an intimacy that spoke of years of memories and experiences. Hannibal found himself amused that he wasn't at all surprised that Will's other half was just as bright and brash as he; he wasn't a man to settle down in a little cottage, from what Hannibal could tell. Perhaps that was why he'd cleaned up so nicely, they had a special date approaching or were looking to enjoy a night out before Will had to return to work.

As the last image of a man Hannibal had not made a friend of in Liverpool, it was a nice one.

The crew moved into the *Campania* a few days before she took on passengers. Everyone had work to do, everyone was keeping busy. The maids and butlers had been on board since she made berth, dusting, cleaning, airing the rooms. Their replacements had arrived to take over the day Will and Bev and Medic moved their luggage in for the next six months at sea.

With his new position as Quartermaster, Will was allocated accommodations in second class, towards the back of the boat. Being married to another crew member also granted them the privilege of a double room, rather than a single one most others resided in. It was far from lavish, but it was large enough to stretch in without touching both walls at once.

"You ready, boss?" Beverly asked him after they'd settled in, straightening his collar and brushing imaginary dust from his shoulders.

Will rolled his shoulders, wincing at a lingering stiffness. He'd overstretched while repairing the *Nola*, and now he'd have to deal with the consequences his first few weeks at sea, "I just hope we have a better selection this time around."

Will and Beverly recognized many of their coworkers aboard the *Campania*, but some rotated through other jobs. Last year, Will had gotten into more than one tiff with men in the engine rooms.

"Whatever happens, you'll be able to handle it."

Will frowned, "You only say that because nobody argues with you."

Beverly snorted, "Half of the men won't yell at me because I'm a woman, the other half won't yell at me because it's terrifying for them when a woman yells back. It's not a respect I've had to work for."

"I'd say terrorizing them counts as work," Will teased.

"Nah," Bev tucked a curl behind Will's ear, "That's a joy for me."

"You're a menace."

"You love me."

"I do love you," Will agreed, smiling, and leaned in to kiss Bev's cheek, "You stay safe."

“You stay civil,” Bev fired back with a wink, “First class and all that.”

“I’ve been working on my attitude,” Will scrunched his nose up, amused, “Shouldn’t be a problem. What’s a week on the water with two hundred entitled men and women?”

“Easy,” Bev answered. Will’s smile eased to something natural, something warm.

“Easy,” he agreed.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He couldn't be sure, as the man's back was to Hannibal, but the dog, Hannibal certainly remembered that particularly stout little fellow.

They (don't) meet on deck

Chapter Notes

As always a HUGE shout out to our INEFFABLE EDITOR Tali!!~

At times Beverly's schedule coincided with Will's, insofar as they both rose before the hail of dawn and broke their fast together the day's work began. More often, however, it did not.

This was to be the first voyage that Bev had taken up the coveted position of Donkey Man -- the boiler boys and grease monkeys lovingly referred to her as the Ass Lass - and she no longer returned to their shared room reeking of coal but oil instead. This was not without its drawbacks. Namely, it was no longer safe for Medic to join her on shift. Coal was one thing, but the boilers? Those incredibly intricate and volatile machines were enough to prove fatal for a sleep deprived engineer; a dog, however well trained, running amok between the six boilers Bev was in charge of was unthinkable.

So, on days when Will could afford it, Medic accompanied him to work instead.

The crew all knew the barrel-chested dog by now and greeted him accordingly. Some offered pats, others treats, and still others were forced to postpone giving Medic his dues and would laughingly hold up their hands before promising to make up for the lack of love with interest soon. Officers found he kept up morale, and remarked on how well trained he was that he rarely got in the way. More often than not he stuck by Will's side, grunting and panting along by Will's feet as he made his rounds. He wore a sash across his body with his name and rank, an honorary Rat Catcher General though more than earned in Will's opinion, and a list of commands he could perform should anyone find him without his master. They included silly tricks that would amuse or calm children such as the ability to give his paw or salute, as well as proper commands to seek help or raise the alarm for an *actual* medic.

Will couldn't have been prouder of the fact that his entire family were loved and respected aboard the *Campania* .

The ship was as ready as she would ever be. Will had walked these halls a thousand times, knew every corner, every jut of metal and every creak of floorboard. He knew every man and woman on the ship, the ins and outs of every job. All that was missing were the passengers, the audience that set the show into motion from here to New York with their endless demands and prevaricating whims. This was to say nothing of the strict class distinctions that were as stringently preserved on the sea as in a London ballroom. There had been exceptions, of course, though the decks themselves served as physical reminders of sociological truth.

In truth, Will could have done without the passengers - give him a ghost ship any day. No passengers to appease for the long haul across the Atlantic; just himself, Beverly, and their dogs. When it was just them they could afford to expand the family, adopt a few siblings for Medic. One day.

Perhaps even without Beverly, sometimes. He knew she would understand the need, would likely even relish the time to herself in their little flat - maybe even house, by that point. Will's dreams were rarely deemed either practical or realistic.

For now, however...passengers. Fortunately for all involved, Will did not have to worry about greeting or guiding. Technically, he was entirely unnecessary to the boarding process: his staff knew their place and their duties. They didn't need his instruction or supervision.

Nevertheless, Will kept a watchful eye. It was a social truism that the measure of a man was not in how he treated his equals, but his inferiors. In Will's experience, those passengers privileged enough to sail in first and even second class did not always live up to their lofty status or aspirations. Usually, they were indifferent to the staff, preserving the social norm, sometimes even kind...but there had been less than decorous incidents, and Will was a cautious man. Once bitten, twice chary...or something to that effect.

He stood off to the side, with enough distance that no one attempted to request anything of him, mistaking him for part of the serving staff, yet near enough to intervene should any issues arise. The third class would board at different ramps, but Will had little concern about them. Typically, people closer to Will's walk of life were grateful merely to make it onto the ship. In truth, the accommodations for steerage were better than some of the places Will had stayed in on land. There was electricity, a washbasin with running water, clean sheets...He'd grown used to the comfort of consistent pay and a safe place to sleep with Bev. They'd even started talking about getting some tickets for their families to travel overseas - Bev's parents were coming up on an important anniversary.

His wandering thoughts were interrupted by a young girl who had rushed up to Medic and fell to her knees to wrap her arms around the bull terrier's thick neck.

"og!" She exclaimed happily, and Medic replied with a pleased 'yip', tongue lolling and tail drumming against the deck.

"Elise!" A woman in a hat wide enough to cut through the crowd on its own rushed out after her daughter.

"Young ladies do not *run!*" she sighed, exasperation clear, when she saw why her child had escaped in the first place, "And I've told you: We ask permission before approaching

animals.”

“It’s alright, ma’am,” Will assured her, as Elise continued to cuddle her newfound friend, “He’s well-trained - harmless.”

“Oh, I’ve no doubt,” the mother replied, adjusting her hat as she considered the little girl at her feet, “It’s those *others* I worry about. Carrying more fleas than the animals they bring with them. Come *along*, Elise, we need to find our rooms. And *where* is your governess?”

The little girl was tugged away, much to her dismay, her wide eyes watching the terrier for as long as they could before rapidly flitting away in surprise as her little shoe caught on the boarding deck, propelling her forward with only enough time to throw her arms out before her to catch herself-

She found a strong arm around her chest caught her first.

“Careful,” Hannibal smiled, setting the girl right again. She grinned up at him and drew her skirt out in a clumsy courtesy. Hannibal inclined his head in a bow in answer, “Such a polite mademoiselle. But ladies should never be unaccompanied - where is your mother, little one?”

“El- *ise!*”

“Ah,” Hannibal winked, stepping aside just enough to keep the boarding crowd from trampling the little girl until her frazzled mother reached her again, “You have a lovely young lady here.”

“She’s a handful,” her mother sighed, before catching sight of Hannibal properly, batting her eyes as her hands immediately found their way up to tuck away a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s so good of you to have looked after her. Who knows what trouble she might have found otherwise? Please, let me express my gratitude.”

“There’s no need, madam.”

“Please, I must insist...Dinner in the drawing room, perhaps, once the boat has set off?” The blush of her countenance betrayed the impropriety of the suggestion, the source from which the young lady had inherited her recklessness.

“I’m afraid I’ve a prior commitment,” Hannibal lied effortlessly, bowing to the mother and winking down at Elise when his face was hidden from view, “I hope you enjoy your journey.”

Freed from social niceties, Hannibal let the flustered mother make a only slightly hurried escape to the interior of the ship, little girl in tow. Hannibal’s bags would be carted to his room by other, less careful hands, but he had kept his briefcase to himself. He adjusted his grip, dark eyes drinking in his surroundings as less observant bodies flittered past him. The man who had taken his ticket had given him directions to his lodgings, but Hannibal knew well how these things went. Half the passengers would swamp the deck, first class and steerage alike, waving frantic goodbyes to a crowd of mostly strangers. The other half would follow Elise and her mother, flooding the halls and generally forming a barricade that would

need to be carefully traversed if Hannibal intended to reach his room. An onerous task that would test his patience regardless of care.

No, Hannibal's attention was better spent elsewhere for now. His research, for instance. There was still much to be done before New York - proposals to write, meetings to plan...and of course, he would not deny the want of a stiff drink, though preferably *without* the invasive company. Objective determined, now all that remained was the location to pursue it.

The halls were just wide enough to bottleneck unpleasantly in the direction of the first class lodgings. Hannibal went in the opposite direction. There were staff members in abundance with whom he might enquire about the layout of the ship, but Hannibal preferred to learn the ship on his own, committing it to memory. He'd spend nearly two weeks on it after all. There would be plenty of time to waste.

He found the gymnasium, first, and then the dining hall, the latter locked for the time-being, meal times on display by the door. People and pleasantries would be unavoidable then, but for now, Hannibal sought the library, where no one would dare bother him for fear of being seen as ill-mannered.

He found it just off the grand staircase, next to the smoking room, and slipped inside.

Within it was a marvel of design and elegance, architecture recreating the graceful sensibilities of the French Renaissance period. Bookcases along one wall, carved panels, a masterful blend of mahogany and oak. Turkish rugs upon the floor softened the steps of any visitors, its chairs and ottomans upholstered in deep velvety blue and sequestered in clusters for privacy. Added to these were writing desks along the opposite wall, basking in the natural light below a bay of windows, and it was one of these which Hannibal immediately seized upon for his own, setting down his briefcase before moving to peruse the books on display.

Despite the lavish room, the selection was limited and consisted primarily of fiction. It made sense, for a voyage where little could be seen from the windows but sky and sea, but Hannibal still had to tamp down a little disappointment that there weren't more encyclopedic works for him to sink into. It would have been too much to ask for research texts, however, even the broadly scholarly would have suited.

No matter.

He'd brought many tomes of his own to enjoy.

For the moment, he settled at his table of choice and removed a few pages as well as a pen from his briefcase.

He'd written to men he'd met in Berlin at the Medical Congress weeks prior to his departure; men with contacts in New York, in Boston, in Chicago, men who understood medicine and pharmaceuticals, men on the cutting edge of the medical profession. Once the boat was on the water he would seek out the captain or quartermaster to ask for a message to be sent from the ship to his colleagues, advising of their speed and approximate day of arrival. For the moment, he wrote to Bedelia.

Dearest , he wrote, for regardless of their shared platonic feelings, she remained as such to him, *another journey begins. The accommodations would meet even your standards. Perhaps next year when you have settled, you and your new husband could accompany me on another voyage.*

Hannibal had met the man only the once, but if Bedelia approved of him, he was no doubt of impeccable manners and class.

He devoted the rest of the letter to their ongoing scholarly debate, with a finishing paragraph critiquing the most recent article Bedelia had sent to him to peruse. No doubt he would write her several more missives over his journey, expanding upon his thoughts and suggesting articles for her in turn.

Divorce suited them both. It had done nothing to impact their closeness or affection for each other. She remained his most devoted friend, perhaps his only friend, and his sole confidant. There were colleagues whose company he enjoyed, but none who had captured his attention so thoroughly, who had brought true zest to his life.

Hannibal would not have described himself as lonely. Isolation suited him, and work gave him sufficient social interaction. His life was simple, but not lacking.

Folding the letter into his bag, Hannibal rose from the table. Enough time would have passed for him to find his quarters without much fuss, besides, the smoking room was quiet yet as he passed it, tapping his fingers against the door jamb, just two members of staff within, but it would soon fill up with boisterous laughter and loud conversation, and he was wary of the library's ability to filter out the noise.

In the smoking room, Will looked up at the sound, but if it was a knock the person responsible had since changed his mind and moved along on his way. He tapped a coin against the counter. The boy on the first shift was barely old enough to partake himself, and Will was wary of leaving him on his own to barter and resist the wheedling of more experienced men who might balk at the prices.

"Just the tobacco," Will told him, "I have rolling papers in my room. Did they say when they'd be sending you relief?"

"Not sure, Mister Graham, sir," the boy replied, reaching under the counter to get the tobacco he knew the quartermaster liked.

"You know you can call me Will, Sam."

"I know, sir," the boy grinned. "But it feels nice saying it, all proper like."

Will smiled, giving Sam a look from under his fringe. "It's good to remember your manners. Wealth or no, being polite and well-spoken is a skill that will take you far in life."

"Yessir," Sam nodded, "I'll keep at it til I'm real good."

“I trust you will,” Will pocketed the tobacco and checked his list. His staff were all reliable, but some were more proactive than others. He’d need to have someone down here for when the ship left port and the smoking room would grow crowded after the excitement of the *bon voyages* upon deck. Sam was a sweet boy but he was naive and poor; neither were attributes that would endear him to those of money and influence, the more keen and canny amongst them would easily see the advantage to be taken, exploitation for product or cruelty equally likely.

“I’ll send Benjamin when he’s finished with his rounds,” Will told Sam after a moment, the boy simply nodded in response.

Will clicked his fingers to get Medic’s attention and the dog trotted out of the smoking room after him.

The corridors and promenades were still filled with passengers, some waving to the crowd below, others just watching the city from the ship’s high vantage point. Will had noticed in that moment when the ship left port that class divides seemed to lower; those in steerage stood next to those in the largest suites in first class, all waving and calling out in delight as they watched the ship take to the water. It was one of the few things Will loved about the crowds onboard: that moment of togetherness.

It never lasted, of course.

Will wove his way through the throng, certain Medic would catch up should he be waylaid. He reached for his pocket watch, twenty minutes until they pulled up anchor and cast off. He didn’t think he’d have time to go down and see Bev before they disembarked, but he’d go out of his way to try, if only to catch a glimpse of her running things below deck like the marvel she was.

They were on cross-shifts for the first two days of the journey, Bev working from midnight to noon, and Will from seven til five. They’d stumble over each other for dinner, then Bev would succumb to the lure of rare sleep first and Will would follow soon after. It didn’t leave much time to catch up, but it was enough to carry Will through his day, knowing there’d be someone at the end of it to listen to him complain.

Will was less involved in the goings on of the engine rooms, if only because one of the benefits of his position was having the power to delegate someone else to wade through sweltering heat to monitor the staff. Still, he knew these parts of the ship just as well. He could have traversed the entire thing blindfolded. He left Medic at the top of a flight of stairs, well out of the way of the dangers below.

Bev was already filthy with oil and coal dust when he found her, wiping sweat from her brow. She walked him through her processes, as if Will was not merely using this visit as an excuse to chat. He gave the workers only a cursory glance; Bev had them well in hand, and he trusted them a good sight more than he trusted some of the waitstaff.

There was a class hierarchy even among the crew - and the mechanics and coal shovellers were at the very bottom of it. On occasion, Will had had to ‘correct’ a stray crew member or two who thought themselves better than those in the belly of the ship, as though each and

every one of them wasn't needed to keep her running smoothly. It was not always a popular decision.

"I'll see you for dinner," Bev said, blowing a kiss rather than smearing grease across Will's uniform, "Give my love to our son."

Will winked and returned upstairs again, greeting their dog with open arms and a stream of garbled words that made Medic whine joyfully and wag the entire back half of his body in delighted response.

"Mr. Graham?" Will looked up. One of the stewards was nervously bobbing beside him, looking far too flustered for so early in the journey.

"Derek?"

"Mr. Graham, someone is calling for the master at arms, but I was told to find you instead and-"

"What happened?"

"I'm uncertain," Derek fidgeted, adjusting his cuffs. "Apparently there have been some items stolen from a lady's room, but we haven't even cast off, I'm-"

"Alright," Will sighed, standing up and gesturing for the boy to lead the way. He doubted there had been a robbery. This happened more often than anyone would have guessed; a wealthy lady or gentleman would claim to have had their precious jewels or bonds stolen, demanding a search the vessel until her property had been returned to them and the thief punished, without a care to the inevitable delay this would cause the voyage, thinking him or herself so important that such cares were beneath them and an entire ship would naturally bow to their whims without a second thought. It never did, of course, but it never stopped such fools trying.

Derek led Will up to the first class covered promenade, where a group of passengers had gathered around - 'lo and behold - an elderly woman bedecked in likely every item of jewelry she owned. As Will approached, the rubbernecks backed away, most going about their business, though few loitered to eavesdrop under the guise of taking in the view.

"Ma'am," Will inclined his head in a respectful nod, "My name is William Graham, I am the ship's Quartermaster, how may I assist you?"

"Well," the woman pursed her lips, setting down the fan that had been fluttering in an endless signal of futility and distress to the others that had surrounded her, "Finally, an officer of stature. Sir, I have been *robbed*."

"Perhaps if we went to your rooms, ma'am, you could properly explain to me what has been taken?" Will replied, endlessly patient. Derek fidgeted beside him but didn't move away. Most likely the woman was in his part of the ship and he'd have to deal with the fallout of this folly. The lady rose to oblige with the righteous indignation of a ruffled swan, Will barely managed to suppress a sigh as she did so, offering her his arm.

Before Will could even ask her name she'd begun her catalogue of grievances, slowing the already endless journey to her rooms. He heard someone call out behind them, and Medic barked brightly before Will *tsked* at him to stop. Perhaps someone desperate enough to stick their nose into the newest melodrama onboard or, less likely, a well intentioned passerby. Will didn't need that, and it didn't matter- he hands full already.

Hannibal stood with the glass of water he'd gone off to fill for the woman having a crisis on the promenade, unable to move. He couldn't be sure, as the man's back was to Hannibal, but the dog, Hannibal certainly remembered that particularly stout little fellow.

He had looked into Mr. William Graham, the mechanic-that-wasn't. According to those who recommended him, he was a difficult man to get ahold of, out on the sea for much of the year. Hannibal had known he worked for one of the many ocean liners that docked in Liverpool, but none of his inquiries had brought up mentions of the *Campania* specifically.

Of all the ships that sailed in and out of Liverpool's port, it seemed too great for coincidence that Hannibal and Mr. Graham would end up on the same one. And yet, there went that dog, sturdy and eager, trotting after his master with unwavering loyalty.

Mr. Graham was, to put it mildly, a curiosity. At their first meeting, he'd been prickly and unpleasant, the sort of man Hannibal would typically find loathsome. It was rare for Hannibal to be greeted with such instant dislike. He was used to a standard of etiquette, the appearance of pleasantries even if one did not feel particularly charitable. Instead, Mr. Graham had made no secret of his abject dislike.

On his own boat, Mr. Graham had been filthy, covered with hours of oil and grease, as to be expected of a boat mechanic. Here on the *Campania*, however, there was no sign of that man. Here, he was clean, crisply dressed, and clearly a man of great import and, given Hannibal's own limited interaction with the distressed lady, greater patience.

Curious, indeed.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“Excuse my intrusion, captain, I wanted to give my regards to the exceptional way the ship has been run.”

They finally properly meet on deck, woah :D

The Lady Hartman was a holy terror - and an insatiable flirt. She was the type of woman whom Will knew well: the bored lady of the manor who thought the lesser classes to be unclean and uncouth, but not so besmirched that they wouldn't provide a lovely, if only trifling, distraction for her boredom. Accompanying this was the thrill of the taboo, the spark of scandal in losing herself to the calloused hands of a working man, and the alluring bonus of getting a shot in at her neglectful husband.

Will bore her attentions with grace, a mask crafted over countless voyages and encounters of this same kind. Were they home, on the Liverpool docks, he might have lost his temper, callous and heavy blunted words telling her exactly what he thought of her and her husband...but he was at work, and he was a professional. So, Will ducked his head and played at amusement and flattery. He plied her with just enough sweetness to settle her, enough patience to unravel the supposed mystery of her missing belongings: the jewelry had been mistakenly packed into her *husband's* belongings.

She fluttered her eyelashes at Will, praising his brilliance. Will would have been *mortified* had he been in her shoes, but then, he'd never have kicked up such a fuss in the first place. It took him a long moment to assure her that yes, he did indeed need to return to his duties, and *oh*, it *was* a shame that he didn't have time for tea.

Medic, without the redeeming qualities of wit and human form to save him from disapproval, had been relegated to guarding the door. He was ecstatic to see Will, and together they finished their rounds. The ship was running beautifully - though this was to be expected. Will made his way into the tobacco room to check on Sam again.

He looked a bit more weary than he had when Will left him, but he still beamed broadly when he saw Will. “Mr. Graham! I'm told my relief will be here around four, sir.”

“Good lad,” Will leaned against the counter with a sigh, fishing a cigarette out of the slim metal case he carried in his front pocket. Sam was quick to offer a lit match for him. Will hummed his thanks and blew the smoke out the side of his mouth so as not to choke the boy.

The room wasn't yet filled with people, but its numbers were rapidly increasing. Will knew that those on board split into two categories: those who cared that the ship was about to leave

the dock and those who had seen it a thousand times before. Those belonging to the latter category would take first advantage of the library and smoking rooms, the parlours, the sitting rooms. He was certain some would approach the dining areas already seeking a meal, even knowing luncheon was not yet scheduled.

He wanted nothing more than to return below decks and sit with Bev by the boilers.

It wasn't that he hated this job, it paid well and his superior officers were, for the most part, genuine and decent people who'd climbed the ranks as surely as he had, but he was nostalgic for the time when his only work was the fruit of his hands labour, to return home covered in oil and laugh with Bev as they both tried to fit into their tiny tub in the Liverpool flat to save refilling the bath after so long a day.

Will smoked the cigarette down to the quick and pinched the end between thumb and forefinger.

"D'you smoke, Sam?"

"I do when I can, sir," Sam replied. "But this here's some quality stuff, sir, I ain't ever be able to afford it."

"Won't ever," Will corrected him gently, before passing a cigarette over with a wink, "And never say never, Sam. Hard work gets you far."

"Thank you, sir!" Sam grinned, taking the cigarette and pocketing it away for later, "Much obliged."

Will tapped his hand against the counter twice and pushed away, easing back out onto the promenade with Medic at his heels.

His rounds were done for the time being and until the ship departed and they left England well behind, he had no one else to check on or observe. He could only hope that no one else lost their jewelry or discovered something amiss with their rooms. Though this was likely wishful thinking. He checked his pocketwatch for the umpteenth time.

He'd lost almost fifteen minutes to the whole "burglary" affair. No matter. He'd go up to the Captain's bridge and to a handoff before watching the ship pull out to sea from the best vantage point the *Campania* had to offer.

The captain was a tall, broad-shouldered man. Former Royal Marine, no less, with a strict sense of how things ought to be run. Will had known him for several years now, since he first took command of the *Campania*. He was a decent sort; he didn't have the time to engage with the entirety of his crew, but he had never brushed someone off when they came to him. And he encouraged Will to seek out each and every man or woman who walked the halls.

As far as captains went, Will had yet to find an equal to Captain Wilson.

"How goes she, Will?" The man himself asked when Will poked his head in.

"Smooth as silk, sir," Will replied easily.

“As she always is, with you aboard.” The captain was not prone to unnecessary flattery; his compliments were the sort Will could pocket and keep.

“I’m keeping an eye on the fresh meat, sir, and considering adding a second pair of hands for Sam Creighton’s first few shifts in the tobacco room, he seems like he could use the support.”

“Where would you take them from?”

Will considered a moment, “The third class lunch staff, if possible, and I’ll donate an hour or two of my own time if necessary.”

“I can’t spare my quartermaster,” Wilson replied, and Will had to smile. The unspoken permission was clear; take who you need. Will nodded and stepped up to where the captain was looking out over the deck. It was mobbed with people, as expected, most pressed to the sides, others meandering through the crowds to take in as much as they can.

Third class mingling with first without a care in the world.

After a moment, the captain checked his own watch and patted Will on the back. “Stay and watch. I know you like to see the excitement it brings.”

Will ducked his head and nodded his thanks. He was known for his penchant for observation and daydreaming; it had never gotten him in trouble but it was a widely known joke onboard that if Will was given the chance simply watch the world go by, he would without a second chance.

Medic trotted after the captain for a few steps, before the man bent to stroke behind his ears and sent him back to Will. With a pleased sigh, Will hefted the stout little dog into his arms so he could watch the ship disembark from the shore of their small island too.

Hannibal watched the harbor grow smaller from the second class promenade deck and felt himself smile.

There was always a sense of adventure when a boat left land and moved to open water. Perhaps it was something vestigial from youth, that desire to venture out on one’s own, be it as an explorer or buccaneer, away from society’s restrictions.

He wondered if that was why Will Graham had decided to make his home upon the sea.

Hannibal wasn’t a great believer in fate, per se, but he was a fan of serendipity and the opportunities she offered. He was certain that he and Mr. Graham were meant to cross paths again, at least this one time more. He couldn’t be sure why, but he found himself almost giddy to discover why.

He had very deliberately not followed Will when he’d recognized the dog, if he was to meet the man again face to face he would do so looking his best, not dishevelled from the jostle and shove that accompanied the general hubbub of boarding. No, Hannibal was going to dress for the occasion, and treat Will Graham as his position onboard demanded.

They would meet each other on more equal footing now. There would be no reason for Will to be self-conscious, nor defensive. And if he still felt a disdain towards Hannibal, his position would discourage him from rudeness, most saliently for the hunter however, there were very few places for him to escape to.

He was still not entirely sure what had driven Will to such passionate disgust, but far from pushing Hannibal away, it had only piqued his curiosity. To be so thoroughly loathed was a novelty, an excitement that Hannibal hadn't had much cause to deal with. The temptation to pry into Will's mind and see exactly what thoughts were hoarded away therein was too great. Hannibal had never shied away from anything that had intrigued him before. There had never been cause, despite the old adage about curiosity and cats.

Hannibal dressed for dinner, crisp and clean. His suits had been hung carefully by his own hand, though he could not stop the maid staff from seeing to the rest of the room.

He took to a table with a few other men who'd grown dignified in their fields, a fellow doctor as well. He'd ordered the fish selection, though seafood was rarely to be trusted inland, it seemed the most natural choice here. His gaze followed the waitstaff between courses, certainly more intently than anyone else at his table, but he didn't see Mr. Graham. No matter. There would be other occasions.

The state room Hannibal had acquired as his accommodations for the voyage was large and lavish. It offered a parlour-like anteroom with two comfortable chairs and a coffee table. Bookshelves that Hannibal had populated with his own books for the moment, also had books provided by the Cunard line for the passengers' convenience; along with a Bible were several encyclopedias, few works of classical if conspicuously respectable nature, and a book of poetry that Hannibal took up on his way through to the bedroom.

It was one of the few on board the *Campania* that offered the chance for the bed to be unfolded into one larger than the single berth size provided. Hannibal did so without issue, and spread the bedding out more comfortably. He'd grown used to a large bed to sleep in, stretching out and turning as he saw fit. When he and Bedelia had slept together, she'd complain that he had a tendency to take over the bed or, conversely, tuck her close against him as though she needed protecting.

Within the bedroom was also a wardrobe, a dresser, and a small writing desk by the window. Electrical lamps hung above the bed and near the table, with switches close enough to reach, rather than one having to turn off the light and blindly make their way fumbling back to bed. Another door by the wardrobe led through to the adjoining private bathroom.

Tossing his chosen book to the bed, Hannibal took his time undressing before he moved to the bathroom to relieve himself and wash up.

The day had been... curious. He'd prepared to spend most of his time either in the library or the promenades enjoying the view, avoiding interaction as much as was feasible when so surrounded, but now... now there was a new venture to occupy his mind: Will Graham.

Hannibal couldn't quite place what fascinated him so about the other man. Certainly his outright hostility was curious, but there was something beneath - more vulnerable - that

Hannibal longed to unearth; it tugged at something almost primal within him, the same something that had had the boys in Berlin, and later back home, calling him 'Daddy'. Perhaps protective, perhaps nurturing...nevertheless it hungered and so in turn fed Hannibal its eager anticipation for the next morning.

He would find Will Graham and speak with him, and see if, perhaps, he could unfold the enigma of the man a little further.

Will and Bev were permitted to take breakfast in the Captain's dining room or the First Class accommodations when invited, usually accompanied by the families of the officers and the head engineer. Otherwise, they happily enjoyed their meals in second class, making sure to always sneak something back in a napkin for Medic.

Loved as he was, he was not permitted in the dining areas while passengers were on board.

While he and Bev were still on split shifts, Will took his breakfast with Captain Wilson, and the two talked shop before returning to their duties. This morning, however, as Will expressed his concerns regarding two men who got along as well as chalk and cheese being rostered on the same rotation, they were interrupted by a polite, accented voice.

"Excuse my intrusion, captain, I wanted to give my regards to the exceptional way the ship has been run." The man smiled as Captain Wilson inclined his head, and continued, "I've been across the Atlantic many times, and I'm always in awe of the ship and her power on the sea. I've been meaning to board the *Campania* for some time now, since her record breaking voyage."

Captain Wilson brought his napkin to his lips and nodded before standing, offering his hand to the man who had spoken.

"She is a good old girl, though not as quick as her sister. Captain Wilson."

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

Beside them, Will dropped his cutlery to his plate and coughed into his fist. The hand that landed against his back to help the choking pass was the same that had been held out to him on the docks of Liverpool, the same that had fed Medic treats in order to garner his favor, and he was *here*.

"My apologies," Hannibal said, his smile unmistakable, "I didn't mean to startle you, nor ruin your meal. I simply had to voice my appreciation."

"Not at all, Doctor," Captain Wilson said, gesturing for a waiter to set another place at their table. "Why don't you join us? This is my quartermaster, Mr. William Graham. He's the man to thank for the smooth running of the staff on board."

"Oh, I believe I am familiar with Mr. Graham," Hannibal said, sliding into the empty seat beside Will. Will shot him a look, one eyebrow raised, trying to convey warning without looking like he was glaring at a passenger. He was not entirely sure he succeeded.

Captain Wilson trusted Will with his crew, his ship, his life. It was unlikely a bad impression from a passenger would take all that away. But Dr. Lecter *was* a first class passenger, and Captain Wilson had to maintain the *Campania*'s stellar reputation. If Dr. Lecter chose to take issue with Will's manners, Captain Wilson might well have no choice but to discipline him.

Will had managed to avoid write-ups and demerits throughout his entire career, primarily through his competence and diligence, even if socializing was not a strong suit. Should Dr. Lecter see fit to bring to fruition any kind of blemish on this perfect record, Will would push him off the damn ship himself and let the sharks have him.

Captain Wilson looked surprised, and Will could hardly blame him. Will was not what one might consider sociable at the best of times, was hardly likely to start with first class passengers, and would not have been invited into their circles even if he'd wanted to be.

"Is that so?" the Captain enquired, "Did you have some trouble with our amenities?"

"Oh, nothing of the sort," Hannibal replied smoothly, "Rest assured, the *Campania* is the finest ship I've yet sailed on. I met Mr. Graham before our journey began, when I was searching for a mechanic."

"Will's the finest I've seen," Captain Wilson praised, "even if he doesn't have much time for the machines these days."

"So I've been told," Hannibal agreed, to Will's alarm.

"We were getting ready to set sail," Will told the captain, determined to steer the conversation away from his and Hannibal's confrontation, mind already latching onto the nearest escape, "I'm afraid I didn't have the time to help Doctor Lecter."

"Nonsense," Hannibal said. Will's hands tightened around his cutlery. "You were the one who pointed me towards the Cunard Line. I'd wanted to sail aboard the *Campania*, but I hadn't yet researched which ships were leaving port this week. I may have missed her without your guidance."

The look Hannibal gave him was almost pleased, amused, and Will felt his hands unclench a little. He swallowed and ducked his head in silent gratitude, deliberately looking away after.

The rest of breakfast unfolded without drama. Much of the conversation was between Captain Wilson and the doctor, and Will allowed himself to eat without worrying what might come back up again. He wasn't ignored, per se, but he was left to his own devices when conversation didn't immediately involve him. So, he thought, instead.

He thought back to the way he'd dismissed Hannibal, how he'd been brash and rude and short. He thought back to the way he'd disregarded the man after, the assumptions he had been all too eager to let the data drive him to; someone of that class, wanting to sail a boat across the Atlantic just to show he could. In truth, Will had nothing against the man, he just didn't want to see him again. And he certainly hadn't expected to see him on *his ship*.

Will finished his breakfast before the two of them and thanked them for the company before excusing himself.

He had his rounds to do, though not for another hour. The Captain was adamant that his crew were allowed ample time before and after at least one meal a day to get themselves properly together, a luxury not usually afforded to those who toiled upon the sea. Will had organized his crew before breakfast service, and now had little else to do except *find* something to do before the doctor inevitably found *him* again.

Which he did, presently.

Will had bent to greet Medic, accepting the dog's endless affection, and found the pup distracted within moments, squirming out of Will's grasp to bound towards someone else.

Doctor Lecter.

The man knelt and accepted the greeting, scratching Medic behind the ears and offering his palm to him; he'd snuck some bacon from his plate for the dog as a treat. Will felt his throat tighten. Words fluttered futilely in the tight cage of his throat.

When the man straightened once more and stepped towards Will, he did the only thing he could think of: He apologized.

"I meant no disrespect in Liverpool," he said, words falling from his lips like water. "I'm afraid I get lost in my own head when I work and unless there had been a prior arrangement for me to repair a boat I find I'm unable to take on work. It's my time to settle my mind, relax before a voyage... you understand."

"Of course," Hannibal agreed, "You're a busy man, and I was interrupting your preparations." He was smiling, more amused than the conversation warranted. He was clearly aware that Will's apology was one of obligation rather than regret, but, bafflingly, he didn't seem to mind.

Will cleared his throat, uncertain now at the turn the conversation had failed to take. "I'm glad you're enjoying the *Campania* ," he added after a moment's pause.

"Immensely," Hannibal assured him, "As I told your Captain, she's a beautiful ship. The last I traveled on wasn't nearly so modern, and it's a blessing to have those amenities at hand."

Will nodded. This, at least, was a conversation he could handle. He could have spent hours praising the *Campania* . Some days she felt as much his ship as Captain Wilson's. "The Cunard Line spares no expense for passenger comfort. Have you enjoyed the library, yet? I believe we have a few texts that might appeal to your interests."

"I've brought plenty of my own," Dr Lecter replied, "though I enjoyed having a quiet place to write."

Will gave another stiff nod. "Well," he said, hesitant. He didn't know what else to say to a man like Hannibal, a doctor, a man of status, someone to whom Will was required to show

respect to although he would rather have ignored him entirely. "I have to make my rounds," he finally settled upon.

"Might I join you?" Hannibal inquired, "I'm sure there's plenty of the ship I haven't yet seen."

"I'm--" It wasn't unheard of. The captain himself often gave tours of the ship when first class passengers asked. It wasn't mandatory, and few enough asked that it was still a novel concept, but Will had never been called upon to host such things. He didn't feel qualified. Moreover, he didn't actually know if he could keep himself civil for that length of time.

"I will be as silent as the grave," Hannibal promised, giving Will a gentle, if conspiratorial look. There was a chance to say no here, Will felt that should he apologize and decline, the man wouldn't go running to the captain to complain about him. However, he also felt like he owed the doctor something to make amends for his previous behavior.

Will swallowed.

"By all means. It might become tedious after a while, I'm afraid, I won't be hosting a tour, I'll be going about my work."

"I completely understand," Hannibal stepped nearer, hands folded behind his back as though he the steward and Will the guest, "I merely wish to sate a curiosity. It's been a long time since I've seen the workings of a ship such as yours."

Will nodded, took out his pocket watch and flipped it open, just to give his eyes somewhere else to look. The man wasn't overwhelming but he seemed oddly *present* in a way that made Will feel as though he was on the cusp of visual vivisection.

"Right. Shall we, then?"

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Nothing’s ever free.”

“Maybe it is in his world,” Bev replied.

Chapter Notes

A warning for animal injury in this. *There is no abuse, and never will be*, but Medic hurts himself in this chapter and needs some help. We **promise** he's okay.

Will started the so-called tour from the very bottom of the ship - at least, the lowest his duties took him as quartermaster.

Hannibal watched as Will addressed every employee by name; every steward and stewardess, every cleaner, every chef and server in the breakfast room. He listened as Will treated them with respect, made notes of their complaints, their requests, and left them with a smile on their face. He noticed, too, that the little dog, Medic, was getting as much attention as his owner, and was treated with just as much deference.

By the time they ascended to second class, the bull terrier had been fed a multitude of scraps from the kitchen hands and been cuddled by no less than five members of staff as well as eighteen passing passengers.

“I didn’t know that a quartermaster’s duties included staff welfare,” Hannibal murmured as they took the stairs. Will ducked his head.

“It shouldn’t,” he admitted. “I... as I was climbing the ranks, I found myself checking in with those a rank below me, and so it went. I think the captain found that my interactions with the staff helped keep up morale, so he requested that I continue, along with my usual duties.”

“And what are your usual duties?”

“Well,” Will smiled, giving Hannibal a look over his shoulder, “I’ll let you know once we’ve covered second class.”

Second class had its own amenities, though none as spacious or well-stocked as first class. The library was small and cramped, but the books were well-kept. Will checked on each and

every person he came across, offering words of advice to the younger staff, and the occasional stern chiding to the elders.

Through it all, he shot Hannibal occasional, slightly bewildered looks, as if surprised the man was still following. Hannibal followed politely along, allowing Will to work without interruption.

Midway through the hall that ran among the second class, Will paused, turning to level Hannibal with a suspicious, wary-eyed stare.

“You don’t have to follow me,” he said, “I’m sure there are plenty of more appealing things for you to be doing. My job isn’t very interesting.”

“On the contrary,” Hannibal said smoothly, “I’m quite enjoying my walk. If I wasn’t here, I’d be only in my room with a book, and as pleasant as that might be, there will be plenty of time onboard for that later. Nothing pressing needs my attention - and it would be a sin to squander the opportunity. Besides, I would hate to tire of all my reading material so soon.”

Will looked unconvinced, but only gave Hannibal a sharp nod in response, turning on his heel.

Will Graham had always been a prickly sort, hackles raised at all times in warning. To the passengers, he was professional. To his fellow employees, practically paternal.

With Hannibal, he was alert, cautious; a porcupine with all his spikes primed or, perhaps more accurately, a wolf or feral stray unsure if he could trust the hand offered to him to be kind rather than cruel.

The dog at Will’s side, however, was anything but untamed. He’d often slow his trotting to walk beside Hannibal instead of his master, and sat at Hannibal’s side when they stopped for Will to run his checks. When Hannibal crouched to pet him, the animal’s tongue lolled happily. Hannibal took his time reading the sash the dog wore, humming, amused, at what he found there.

“You have him incredibly well trained.”

“Excuse me?” Will had just finished speaking with a steward, and gave Hannibal a strange look. When the doctor gestured to Medic, he sighed, relieved, “He’s a little menace, but he’s mine.”

“How did you come by him?”

“Uh,” Will licked his lips and hesitated in moving on to his next check, “I found him as a pup. Someone had dumped a litter and he was the only one left.”

Hannibal clicked his tongue, “Animals do not deserve our human cruelties.”

Will paused, giving Hannibal a gentler look. “No,” he agreed quietly, “No, they really don’t.”

For a moment they stood together, the three of them, before Will snapped out of his reverie and excused himself, leaving Hannibal and Medic to follow along to the stairs that would lead them up to first class.

Hannibal stood by as Will spoke to every staff member here, too, with the utmost respect. He listened to how Will gently educated the boy selling tobacco in the smoking room on etiquette and how to speak to the customers, before passing him a well-rolled cigarette. Hannibal suddenly had a flashback to an early evening, himself and Bedelia lazy and lax from imbibing both alcoholic and chemical substances, trying to find animals in the cloud formations.

He wondered how Will Graham would react to such an evening.

It was when they were walking briskly on one of the promenade decks, Will explaining quietly that once his duties were over, he unfortunately would not be able to take Hannibal up to the bridge without the captain's permission, that they heard a sharp, plaintive yelp.

Medic seemed to have gotten his foot stuck, though to what, neither man could tell. He was thrashing about in panic, trying to yank himself free, deaf to his master's soothing words as instinct took over. By the time Will reached him, Medic had freed himself and was whimpering, paw held up, blood dripping dark onto the impeccably clean deck.

"Oh *fuck*," Will said, voice low and thick with worry. He dropped to his knees, holding the dog still while he mopped at his paw with an old handkerchief pulled from his pocket.

Medic, despite his name, was having none of it. He squirmed in Will's grasp, yelping at even the most ginger of touches. Will had to trap him between his thighs, nearly sitting on the poor creature, just to keep him still.

"No, buddy, please- dammit, Medic, I'm trying to help!"

Medic made a high keening sound, distressed. Hannibal crouched beside them, reaching out to the bleeding paw.

"Don't touch him," Will snapped, shifting as if to shield Medic with his body. There was a panicked anger in his eyes, ire born of worry. It was a look Hannibal had seen many a time on a concerned parent.

"Will," Hannibal said, voice low and gentled. Reasonable. "I only wish to help. He's safe with me, I'm not going to hurt him."

Will stared him down for a long moment, corners of his mouth turned down, before his fear for his pup finally overwhelmed his distrust of strangers. "Please," he said stiffly, holding Medic's paw still for Hannibal to investigate.

Hannibal had seen plenty of blood in his time. He'd seen it on himself, on patients, on the cadavers used in anatomy labs, in the slums on unfortunates who hadn't survived the night in a harsh city. He'd seen it naturally pour from women once a month. Blood had never held the squeamish novelty for him, and now it hardly held any novelty at all. Nor did the animal's

panic; Hannibal had no worry of being bitten. He was not convinced, however, that his expertise did not extend to canine anatomy.

He felt, immediately, that the pad of the foot had something in it, a splinter, or a piece of metal, something had pierced it and lodged deep in the sensitive tissue.

But there was more blood than just a piercing would warrant.

Will whispered to his dog, pressing his lips to the animal's floppy ears as he held him still between his thighs, arms wrapped around him as Medic continued to whimper. When a steward approached, drawn by the commotion, Will asked him to bring a mop and pail, and to get word to the captain that he would be late to the bridge.

"I have blood on my uniform," he murmured, eyes glazed. "I need to change."

Hannibal leaned closer to inspect Medic's injury and saw quickly what had happened. He'd torn a claw trying to free himself from whatever had caught him, and blood was pouring thick and hot from the wound now.

"Come," Hannibal said, standing and offering his hands to Will to help him lift the dog up, "We'll go to my rooms. I have a medical bag."

"I couldn't possibly--"

"My rooms are near, and I have the equipment to help him," Hannibal replied evenly, appealing to Will's empathetic mind as well as his logical one. Certainly, there were medics on board trained in first aid, but Hannibal was here, now, with the ability to help.

"It's not standard--"

"The bleeding will not stop unless we treat the wound and sterilize it," Hannibal continued, "We can discuss standard procedure later, should you need to report the incident, but not now."

Not now.

Will swallowed, looking down at his whimpering pet. The vivid distress on his face was the most emotion he'd shown Hannibal yet. More than the heat of his anger, *far* more than his professional smile. This was Will Graham, raw and real.

"Thank you," Will said softly. He hefted Medic up with him, heedless of the further smear of blood against his clothing. Hannibal would have to offer recommendations for that later, for now, however, he led the way to his room.

Medic whimpered and whined the whole way to Hannibal's first class accommodations, but he no longer struggled. Will worried about his acquiescence, holding his handkerchief tight around the dog's injured paw.

Hannibal's room may as well have not been touched at all. There was no sign he'd unpacked, no sign he'd slept. The maids were thorough, of course, but Will doubted they'd entered this room at all. No, Doctor Hannibal Lecter was the sort to have tucked hospital corners into his sheets without any prompting, and to have tidied away any mark he left on the room. There was something crisp and clean about the man, a natural precision, something Will in his endless work had never attained.

Will glanced around the room, searching for towels. He hesitated to step any further past the door frame, not wanting to smear blood on any of the carpeting or upholstery. The wooden deck was easy enough to clean, but Will could not afford to repair a first class room.

Hannibal procured a towel, not from the water closet, but from his wardrobe. It was not one of the Cunard Line's linens, and Will blinked as Hannibal spread it out across the floor.

"That...Is... Is that *yours* ?"

Hannibal looked up at him. "Presumably, one of us would need to pay to replace any ship property we stained. Better to skip that step, I'll work the blood out later."

"I'm--"

"Will," Hannibal moved off to retrieve something else from the en suite bathroom: A large medical bag that looked as impeccable as the man carrying it. He knelt on the floor, uncaring for his clothes, and looked up again, expectantly, "He's in pain."

That was enough to snap Will back to the present, the animal cradled in his arms, his best friend after Bev for the past seven years.

He knelt and lay Medic out on the towel, sitting close enough to bracket him with his body should he jerk about or need to be restrained. He'd never known Medic to bite, even when another dog was in his territory and the little terrier barked loud enough to move his entire body with the sound, he'd never attacked. He hoped he wouldn't now.

A towel was one thing.

The hand of a surgeon was quite another.

He watched as Hannibal opened his bag, set out his tools. There were things in there that Will had never seen, things that he couldn't imagine a use for, things that looked, quite frankly, like devices of torture rather than healing.

And yet.

The doctor disinfected his hands with alcohol, soaked a cotton bud with it and set it aside before taking up a pair of tweezers.

"He has a splinter," Hannibal told him, "I believe that's what hurt him initially, and what had him trapped in place."

Will just nodded numbly - what else could he do? He stroked Medic's fur, leaned close to whisper to him that everything would be alright, that they would be okay, that he was a brave and strong and powerful boy.

When Hannibal pulled the splinter free, Medic yelped so loudly Will couldn't help but make a pained noise himself. He watched as Hannibal dabbed the wound with the alcohol before taking up another bottle from his bag and soaking another bud in that. This time, Medic groaned, entire body trembling in pain. But when the cotton was pulled away, the bleeding on his paw had stopped.

"Hydrogen peroxide," Hannibal explained.

The words meant nothing to Will, but he nodded along anyway. He couldn't care less what Hannibal used, so long as it worked.

Hannibal next drew a sharp needle from his things along with a spool of dark, coarse thread. Will watched with wary eyes as he threaded the needle.

"He's not going to sit still for this," Hannibal warned. Frankly, Will didn't blame Medic one bit. He wasn't sure how well *he* would sit to have his skin sewn together.

In the end, Will had to resort to pinning him bodily. They'd tried holding his paw still, Medic trapped between Will's thighs, and for all this they'd received loud, keening cries and frantic wriggling. Will had had to drape himself over Medic's little body, holding him down and whispering apologies as the dog yelped.

At one point, Hannibal soaked a rag in something from yet another bottle, and offered it to Will.

"Gently apply it to his face," he said. When Will looked askance, Hannibal just nodded, "It will help."

And oddly... it did. After a few moments of breathing in whatever was on the cloth, Medic started to still, his tongue lolling, his eyes glassy. He was alive, of that there was no doubt, but he wasn't struggling as much anymore, and his pained little noises eased in volume.

"It's done," Hannibal said, after what must have been the longest few minutes of Will's life. Will sat up, though he kept Medic's gently squirming body held against him.

"The final step will be much easier," Hannibal assured him, holding up the gauze.

None of it was easy. Medic's whimpers even drugged hurt Will deeply, and he felt as exhausted as if he'd run the length of the ship by the time Hannibal was truly finished. When they both sat back, the little dog sewn up and bandaged between them, Will drew a hand through his hair, uncaring for the blood he smeared over his skin.

"What was that?" he asked, gesturing with his chin at the cloth still on the towel by Medic's head.

“Chloroform,” Hannibal replied, “Its anaesthetic qualities were proven by Robert Mortimer Glover, interestingly, on dogs as his primary patients.”

“He’s...” Will didn’t know what to say. ‘Alright’ felt like a hideous overstatement, yet apart from the mess over his fur and the towel he lay on, Medic no longer looked like a trainwreck. Hannibal had done an incredible job wrapping his paw; from the foot all the way up his leg, and had even taken care to wrap the bandages up and around his shoulders to keep them in place.

“He’ll be sore for a little while,” Hannibal admitted, wiping his hands on a cloth, “But there should not be any infection. Should you notice a foul odor or his bandages growing wet, please let me know immediately, otherwise...”

“Otherwise?”

Hannibal smiled, and Will felt his entire body relax; like a weight had been lifted, the strange weightlessness of knowing that someone else was in control and that for once he didn’t need to be, when his entire life was based around being in control and he’d never wanted that.

“Otherwise, I will see you and him both in two days to change his dressings.”

Will found himself nodding. Hannibal would take care of it, and Will just had to come find him. Simple. Easy.

Nothing in Will’s life was ever simple or easy, but he was too weary to question the change now. Hannibal had been, thus far, honest and straightforward, and if he decided he had changed his mind and declined Will when he returned, well, there were other medics on board.

“I’ll replace the towel,” Will told him, “And pay for the supplies.”

“That is entirely unnecessary,” Hannibal said, beginning to pack his tools away.

“Your kit can’t be cheap,” Will argued.

“I helped Medic because he needed it, because he was my patient, Will, not for money.”

Will hesitated. Generally, nobody did anything for free. Will certainly didn’t. Will charged as much as he could feasibly get away with for any service he performed, and still barely managed to scrape by, some seasons.

Hannibal’s expression was calm, but unwavering. He was not going to accept payment, no matter the fuss Will put up. And Will could hardly put up a fuss while on duty and representing the Cunard Line.

He stood as Hannibal did and held out his hand to shake. When Hannibal took it, he tugged Will a little closer, setting his free hand on his shoulder. They were close now, near enough to whisper, enough that at any other moment, at any other time, Will would have pulled away in panic.

“He’ll be alright,” Hannibal promised him softly, “And so will you. You owe me nothing. Not for towels, not for equipment. I made an oath to heal, and I keep to it, regardless of whether my patient is human or not. It was an honor to help him.”

Will made a sound that could have been a laugh, should have been a laugh, and nodded, still squeezing Hannibal’s hand. When the other let him go, Will felt off kilter, unstable.

“Do you need help taking him to your rooms?”

“No,” Will swallowed and shook his head. “No, thank you, I’ve... I’ll just tell Bev my... my wife. She’ll - She’s off her rounds earlier than I, and will be able to look in on him. Thank you for your assistance. Just... thank you.”

“Of course, Will.”

Will fled. He wasn’t proud of it, but he needed the space. He was unused to charity, and it burned unpleasantly down his spine now that the intimacy of touch had dissipated.

There was always a catch, always a trap waiting at the bottom of the hill. Will was still ruminating on it when he tucked Medic safely into their room and stopped to change. Afterwards, he disappeared below deck to find Bev. The captain could wait a few minutes longer, he’d already had to wait this long, a few moments more would mean nothing.

His discomfort must have been written across his face because Bev took one look at him and called over her shoulder, “I’m taking five.”

“Everything’s fine,” Will told her immediately, “I handled it.”

Bev merely arched an eyebrow. It climbed higher and higher as Will explained what had happened, and when he finished, she let out a low whistle, “Friends in high places.”

Will laughed, another helpless sound, and shook his head, “I doubt it, just... just a chance encounter at the right time. I... God, Bev, I was so rude to him in Liverpool. Why would he be so kind to me now?”

“Some people fight back with kindness,” Bev shrugged, arms crossed over her middle. She’d tensed up when Will explained what had happened to Medic, she looked like she was a minute away from running upstairs to check on him, but she had another three hours left on shift before she could, “I’d take it for what it was, Will: A man wanting to help an injured animal.”

“It’s hard to believe that’s all it was,” Will replied with a sigh, bringing a hand up to scrub at his eyes beneath his glasses. His day was only getting started and he already felt like he’d been flayed alive, “Nothing’s ever free.”

“Maybe it is in his world,” Bev replied, placing a warm hand on Will’s shoulder with a squeeze, just where Hannibal had touched him not ten minutes before, “In his world money isn’t an issue, it’s a given.”

“Ha,” Will sighed, stepping close and resting his head on Bev’s shoulder. She gently massaged the back of his neck until some tension left him and kissed his temple.

“What a life, huh, Graham?”

“The dream.”

“Who knows,” Bev shrugged Will off gently, and he stood up again, “Maybe it’s a burden, we just don’t see that part.”

“I somehow doubt it,” Will smiled.

Bev grinned, leaning in close to whisper conspiratorially, “Me too.”

With another gentle kiss to his cheek she returned to work and Will moved upstairs to their rooms again.

Medic was sleeping, his barrel chest rising and falling on easy breaths as he spread out on Will’s bed. For a while, Will just watched him, watched his sweet boy lay there, bandaged up. He thought back to how quickly Hannibal had worked, how easily he had told Will what to do, demanded he do things that otherwise would have left Will scattered and afraid.

Will hadn’t felt that safe since he’d been a child, when his father had been the one who had told him what to do and where to go, guiding Will through his fears. With Bev, he was the breadwinner, in the eyes of society, and in his own; he wanted what was best for her, to bring her a life she deserved, where she didn’t need to break her back working to keep them alive. For himself, well... Will rarely thought about himself unless it was in relation to someone or something else.

And suddenly, Hannibal had.

Of all people, Hannibal Lecter had seen Will as someone who was more than an addendum to someone else.

It felt strange. It felt nice.

It scared Will to death.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Will,” Bev ran a hand through his hair, tucking a curl behind his ear. “You have nothing to apologize for. I want this for you. I love you. The magic of love is that there are so many forms of it, and none of them need be a reflection of the other or cancel one another out. If this works out, or it doesn’t, if you ever find a man, or you don’t, the fact that I love you won’t ever change.”

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the skipped week you guys! Real life health stuff got us a little behind posting schedule, but we're back on form and here to share chapters every week as before!

For the first few days after the incident, Will longed for the days he could still carry Medic about in a sling as he had when he’d been a pup.

The stout little dog slept through nights, and wriggled his entire body when both he and Bev were there with him, trying to stand up and huffing in protest when he was gently laid down again by either one of them.

He did love the extra treats they snuck him down from dinner-- and he certainly didn’t complain when several of the maidstaff came to check on him personally, having not seen him on Will’s rounds the day after his injury. Even the captain wished the little dog his best, which Will found at once bewildering and endearing.

Both Will and Bev visited him every chance they got throughout the day, fluttering about like nervous parents around a newborn.

Three days into their journey-- and two days after Medic’s injury-- there came a knock on their door after dinner. Will got up to get it; Bev had dozed off again, as she was wont to do after dinner, with only scant hours left before her shift started at midnight. Medic lifted his head from her arm and wagged his tail hard enough to thump against the bed as he watched Will go.

Beyond the door stood Hannibal Lecter.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said. Will shook his head, but stepped out of the room just the same.

“Not at all,” he replied, “but I’m afraid Bev’s asleep, her shift schedule is different from mine during the first week.”

“I won’t impose,” Hannibal said, ducking his head in what Will could only consider a bow, “I just wanted to check on my four-legged patient and see how he’s faring.”

Will glanced over his shoulder, a frown twisting his features. Infection was always a concern, particularly on a pup who could not entirely be persuaded to stop licking at his wounds.

But Bev deserved the rest. She was due another of her episodes any day now, and Will knew how drained they left her.

“Would you mind doing it out here?” he asked. Hannibal tilted his head, considering Will.

“There’s no need for that,” he said, “We can simply use my room again.”

Hannibal’s room, opulent and carefully put together, sparsely but elegantly decorated...Well. At least Medic wouldn’t be bleeding all over it this time.

Medic was wary of Hannibal, shrinking back against Will’s chest. No doubt he associated Hannibal with the pain and misery of the other day, the ache that still surely lingered in his paw. The treats Will had palmed Hannibal went a long way towards soothing his fears, and soon enough Will was struggling to keep ahold of the stocky little thing. Medic’s entire body vibrated with excitement as Hannibal slipped him morsels the whole way to his cabin.

Inside, however, Medic went still once more, making a low, betrayed keening sound as Hannibal drew out his medical kit. Hannibal clicked his tongue, but he was smiling as he considered the animal with narrowed eyes.

“Not undeserved, my good sir, but you’ll excuse me just one more time I hope.”

“I really appreciate you taking the time,” Will said. He sat on the floor, as far from any rugs he could get, and held his dog against him, rubbing his barrel chest to soothe him, “You’ve gone out of your way to help and... I’m unsure how to repay the kindness.”

“There is no need--”

“There is,” Will insisted gently, “In my world...there is. There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

The doctor hummed, but didn’t immediately reply. Will found himself unsure of what else to say. He knew that he would feel indebted until his own conscience released him, and that that would be unlikely unless he found a way to repay Hannibal. Money wasn’t worth much here, not when the doctor had more of it than Will would ever see in a lifetime.

No, the man clearly wanted something else.

He wanted to *know* Will. He wanted to know him in the way Bev did, and he was going about it, Will realized, in the same way Bev had, all those years ago. Gentle yet continued

persistence; subtle vies for information, quirks - any knowledge seemed of equal value. He wanted to know Will more than as a passing face. He wanted to know Will as a *friend*.

It scared Will, this possibility of being seen by those eyes as trained in the lines of vivisection as healing. The idea thought caused his breath to hitch as his chest tightened, his skin uncomfortably warm and flush all over. Friends were not Will's metier and he enjoyed his solitary life. Safe, without need for the company of others - had *never* needed it, never had anyone else but Bev.

When Hannibal approached and crouched next to them, taking up Medic's paw, Will wrapped his arms around the animal and hushed him. The bandage came off clean and easy, the gauze beneath had darkened only a little with what the doctor explained was the body's normal secretions for this kind of injury.

"Once I've cleaned it up and bandaged it again, I hope I can begin rebuilding your trust in me again, Mr. Medic," Hannibal told the dog, scratching behind his ears as Medic panted and trembled.

"The way you talk to him..." Will said, and then stopped himself. Perhaps Hannibal also had dogs, back home, or other pets. Perhaps he had children who had taught him to speak softly and with warm regard to the smallest of creatures. Wealth did not always rip the humanity from people, even if it often seemed that way to Will.

Hannibal tilted his head. He had a habit of doing that, as if Will was something fascinating, meant for closer investigation and further study. Will could not decide if he felt more like a butterfly pinned to a board or a unicorn in the wild.

"I've found animals and children to be alarmingly similar in many aspects," Hannibal said, "In particular, they respond well to being treated with respect over condescension. As do their parents."

The last was added with a deferential nod towards Will, who felt vaguely his skin vaguely flushed once more at the consideration. It was not often that strangers took his desires into consideration, particularly in matters which may seem minor to most.

"Medic responds well to food and attention," Will said, "Of *any* kind. I'm not sure he'd be able to tell if you were condescending to him."

"Ah, but *you* would," Hannibal said, holding out his hand for Medic's paw. Will guided it into place, wincing in sympathy at Medic's protests. "And I find *you* to be a far more difficult creature to impress, Mr. Graham."

Will laughed, a soft and disbelieving sound, looked up at Hannibal through the hair he'd allowed to fall free of its tidy style, "Why would you want to impress me?"

"Why not?"

And that was a question that Will had no answer to, a question he didn't think he'd ever have an answer to. *Why not?* Because Will had nothing to give in return, because he worked a job

that he loved but that exhausted him, because he couldn't provide for his wife as a husband should, because he had no life outside of this work, no hobbies, nor time for any.

He had nothing to offer a man like Hannibal; a man with taste and culture, with wealth, status, opportunities. A man with *options*, options that were so far out of Will's grasp that he didn't even think to reach for them.

The doctor seemed unfazed by Will's silence, and concentrated instead on taking care of his patient. He murmured to the dog as he examined the stitches still carefully in place, gently petted over his unhurt toes and soothed him as he applied something that clearly stung to his injury. Hannibal was both methodical and meticulous, his movements held no hurry, allowing Medic time to adjust to anything new he did without growing impatient or angry.

All in all, it took less than ten minutes to rebandage the dog's injury, and Hannibal smiled at the creature after in a way that made Will's heart clench. He cupped Medic's face and gently shook his muzzle.

"What a good boy you are," Hannibal told him softly.

"Thank you,"

Will's cheeks burned. He'd meant it as gratitude for Hannibal's care with Medic, but in context it had come out... differently. Yet when Hannibal looked at *him* next, there was no derision or malice in his gaze. It was soft, instead, almost longing.

Will cleared his throat loudly and drew his free hand through his hair, looking anywhere but at the man still crouched before them.

If friendship was an unfamiliar and ill-fitting coat then desire was even more so. Will had no knowledge of what it was to want or be wanted, in any form. Platonic...romantic...

Sexual.

He could not quite pin down the source of Hannibal's curiosity, nor could he rationalize the feelings he held within himself. If Will were to be perfectly honest, the way he felt when confronted with Hannibal's attempts at interaction was twined so thoroughly with anxiety that it felt more like the gut clenching protests of a bad bit of cheese than the bloom of companionship.

There was nothing of Will that should have appealed to a first class passenger. The walls of Will's life were painted with engine grease and coal dust, his hands calloused from more physical labour than Hannibal himself would have ever seen. Medicine might still be considered a trade, yet beyond the butchers' alleys of the Everton district, it bore little resemblance to the toil of other guilds.

Yet here they were, and Will found himself, for the first time, reluctant to take his leave.

"I would like to repay you, somehow," He said, holding up a hand when Hannibal seemed about to speak, "I know you said it wasn't necessary, but this is not the sort of service that

should go uncompensated.”

Hannibal studied Will for a moment, taking in the resolve etched into his expression, before he nodded, “Of course.”

Will breathed a sigh of relief, “It might take some time, but--”

“You should be my guest for dinner.”

Will choked on whatever else he was going to say. He couldn’t *remember* what else he was going to say. He didn’t even know if it mattered anymore; Hannibal’s words made his heart stutter up to his throat and lodge there, heavy and hammering.

“I’m sorry?”

“Dinner,” Hannibal repeated. “With me, when your work schedule allows for it, of course. Your wife is welcome to join us.”

Will released the breath he was holding and visibly relaxed. The thought of having dinner with Hannibal, alone, in the intimacy of the environment made, under the other watchful eyes of the dining rooms, him feel...

It made him *feel*. Emotions were not strangers to Will, so often he spent his time pushing them aside from where they were left strewn about by others. But this...he’d never experienced such feelings before, something so strong as to knock a man off his balance entirely, leaving him winded, discombobulated, untethered.

Alive.

“That’s incredibly kind of you,” Will replied at length, “Though I struggle to see how this could be repayment for your help.”

“I enjoy your company,” Hannibal replied honestly, and Will swallowed, “I would like to spend time with you, learn about your life, about what brought you to the *Campania* ...and meet your wonderful spouse, of course. She must be an incredible woman to so capture your heart, after all.”

“She is,” Will said, and though the words were true, for the first time he felt a stirring of unease at the deception he and Beverly had created.

Most days, it did not feel like deception. He loved Beverly more than he loved anyone else, and she returned the affection. But for once, Will thought idly of what might come of it if he were to imply unhappiness in his marriage.

It would have been a cruelty to do so to Beverly, though, who lit up Will’s life in all the ways that mattered. And it would have meant laying something out for a man who might not be so accepting of the offer. It wasn’t as though Will had any experience picking such men out of crowds, after all.

“Our time off overlaps very little, I’m afraid,” Will continued. “If you wanted to catch us for a meal, there’s a chance we’d be late for it.”

“It’s not tardiness if you arrive when you say you will,” Hannibal assured him. “The meal will keep. I find it unlikely that the staff will shoo *you* out of the dining room early.”

First class was, in fact, given a rather generous amount of time to enjoy their fare. Hannibal was right; should Will and Beverly delay even an hour there would still be enough time to have their fill.

“If you’re certain,” Will said slowly, “I’m afraid we won’t be as impeccably dressed as your fellow diners.”

“You’ve eaten in first class before.”

“Ah, but that was at the Captain’s behest,” Will said with a wry smile, “And he knows exactly what my salary can afford.”

“And I would be hosting you and your wife as my guests. Anyone who has a word to say about it would do so to me, and I would quickly lay any insinuations to rest,” Hannibal assured him. And, for once, Will took someone at their word.

Petting Medic gently, he allowed himself to sit quietly with the doctor before clearing his throat and standing to go. Medic limped up alongside him but grumbled when Will bent to pick him up. He’d been good at getting about on his three healthy legs the last day or so, and only needed help on the stairs.

Dogs were resilient things.

“Thank you, again,” Will said, “For the invitation as well.”

“The pleasure is truly mine,” Hannibal replied, inclining his head once more as Will held the door to his room open and hesitated in exiting. When Hannibal looked up and smiled, Will found himself unable to hold back a smile of his own.

“Dinner, huh?” Bev grinned, rubbing her eyes and stretching in bed. Medic was busy building a nest at the foot of her bed for his own comfortable snooze.

“I didn’t know how to decline.”

“Bullshit, Graham,” she snorted. “You know just how to get people to leave you alone, that is, if you want to be left alone.”

“Shut up,” Will shucked his shirt and dropped his suspenders and sat heavily on the bed to take off his boots. He could feel Bev’s eyes on the back of his head until he looked up again, and when he did her eyebrow was raised.

“You find him interesting,”

“No, I don’t.”

“Will,” Bev let her feet slip to the floor and rested her elbows on her knees. “It’s okay to find people interesting. It’s about bloody time you did, considering.”

“Finding people interesting could get me killed,” Will said, before he could stop himself.

For a moment, they were both quiet. Even amongst themselves, they didn’t talk about their irregularities. What would have been the point? Beverly had no interest in physical intimacy, and she had been freed from external pressure by marrying a man who would never ask to touch her. Will, for his part, had cravings, but had never intended to act upon them.

Will sighed, letting his shoulders drop from their hunched and tense position. “He’s interesting,” he admitted, “And I enjoy his company more than I should. But when the boat docks in New York, he’ll get off, and I’ll stay on.”

Beverly nodded solemnly. He could tell she wanted to push the subject - that was the sort of woman she was. She had opinions often and loudly, and he loved her all the more for it.

But she didn’t mother him, didn’t second guess decisions he made. She supported him throughout everything, as he did her.

In a way, their marriage was likely stronger than many of those who’d wed due to mutual attraction.

“So, we’ll meet him,” Beverly said, “have dinner, conversation. Would you prefer to meet on your own? I’m sure there’s time for me to come down with a headache or the vapors.” Her lips twisted up at the corner, a playfulness she could not entirely reign in.

“No,” Will said firmly, “It’s not as if I’m aiming to court the man. We’re just conversing. No reason you shouldn’t get to enjoy the good silverware with me.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

The next evening, Will finished his shift at seven, and Bev napped and woke when he returned to the room, they dressed for dinner.

“What the hell do rich people wear?” Bev asked, shaking out another pair of trousers to check if they had any visible patches on them. All of her pairs did. She moved to Will’s uniform ones and stuck out her tongue when he glared at her.

“Dresses with a deep dip in the back to show off your shoulders.”

“Disgusting,” Bev laughed, stepping into Will’s pants. They were nearly the same size when it came to most clothes, though Will was far broader at the shoulders than Bev could ever hope to be.

“At least wear one of the blouses your mother got you,” Will suggested, slipping free his tie and taking up a cravat instead.

“I didn’t pack one.”

“I did,” Will replied, to Bev’s deep displeasure. The blouses were far too flowy in Beverley’s opinion, had far too much fabric on them that could and did snag on everything. Bev was used to wearing practical, hardy clothes,

“I feel like a poodle.”

“Definitely not Medic’s mum then,” Will replied. Beverly shoved him in response.

They managed to get out the door, dressed as well as their paltry supplies allowed, ten minutes later, striding with quick purpose towards the stairs. At the top, however, Will stopped and wrapped Bev’s hand over his arm.

“We have to at least *try*,” he muttered. “The fact that you’re wearing trousers has already scandalized at least five women.”

“Good,” Bev replied, chin proudly raised, “I bet they’re jealous.”

They found Hannibal at a table by one of the large windows, dressed as though he were attending an opera. He stood as they approached, and moved to pull out a chair for Bev. When he offered his hand for her, she hesitated before allowing him to take it. Her hands were calloused and rough, one had a burn down the side where she’d brushed up against the pumps. Hannibal didn’t miss a beat, he kissed her knuckles.

“Mrs. Graham,” he said, guiding her to sit, “It’s an honor and a pleasure.”

“Please,” Beverly said, visibly flattered, “call me Bev.”

“Bev,” Hannibal said obligingly, with a smile that had no doubt charmed dozens of women landside. Even Bev, who would sooner have married *Medic* than given any man besides Will her time, seemed pleased by his impeccable manners.

Hannibal pushed Bev’s chair in for her before Will had the chance to, and Will awkwardly settled in alongside her. Hannibal had secured one of the smaller tables; there had clearly been other diners at one point, but they had finished and left before Will and Bev arrived.

“I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty of arranging our orders,” Hannibal said, taking a seat across from Will, “I’m aware that I am on borrowed time; I wouldn’t want to intrude on your rest.”

Bev shot Will a look, one eyebrow raised. Will felt just as surprised at the consideration, though nervous at the forwardness. Their meals were paid for as part of their salary, and they were welcome in any dining hall if they were invited by the Captain or a passenger, but Will still felt a bit of hesitance. As Beverly’s husband, he was meant to provide, or so his father had repeatedly drilled into his head. It felt odd to have someone else looking after *him*. Strange...but not unpleasant.

“No, that’s fine,” Will finally said, “We aren’t picky.” Hard to be, when the other option was going hungry.

Hannibal made no comment on Bev's attire, he didn't mention her rough hands or her shaggy and unfashionable haircut. In fact, he seemed not to prioritise her appearance at all. Instead, he asked her:

"Will lamented to me your similarly gruelling shifts as his own, but in my wanderings I've never met you on board?"

"You wouldn't've," Bev replied, her smile still present, but turning a little mischievous, "I'm down with the dirtiest of them in the bellows of the ship."

"Are you an engineer?"

Both Will and Bev were taken aback for a moment. Nary a mention of how inappropriate it was for a woman to be working, not so much as an implication as to how unseemly and unheard of it was for women to be doing hard labor. Merely an honest question that at once showed genuine curiosity and equanimity, one that cemented in Bev's mind just how proper Dr. Hannibal Lecter was.

"Donkeyman," Bev replied at length, "Or, actually, the A--"

"Bev is in charge of the engine room," Will interrupted before she could curse in the middle of the first class dining room, "One of the two."

"Incredible," Hannibal said, smiling. At that moment, a waiter arrived with a curtained table with their meal. Hannibal had ordered the fish, with roasted vegetables alongside. The wine the waiter poured was one Hannibal claimed would go wonderfully with the food, then they were left to enjoy their dinner.

"How did you come by such a profession?" He asked. Bev gave Will a look.

"I'm not sure how much Will has told you about how we met," she started.

Hannibal listened patiently. In truth, Bev was a wonderful storyteller, she could get a laugh out of the most stoic of people, and soon their table was drawing gazes for their laughter as Bev regaled the doctor with stories of her and Will's exploits as young kids together, into their teens.

"You should have seen him," Bev said, "Covered head to toe in mud, in his Sunday best. His father yelled for *hours*."

"And *you* got off scott-free," Will muttered, not at all still bitter over such a distant memory. Bev fluttered her eyelashes at him.

"Of course I did. I was just a fragile little girl. *You* were supposed to be chaperoning me."

"Fragile," Will said with a snort, "She beat up half the kids in our neighborhood."

The conversation was certainly uncouth, but if anything, Hannibal seemed charmed, "A woman who knows how to stand up for herself is a formidable force indeed," he said. "You'd have gotten along quite well with my ex-wife."

The presence of a wife, as Will well knew, was not the same as an absence of other desires, but it still caught his attention.

"I'm sorry," Beverly said, but Hannibal waved off her sympathy.

"I'm not," he told her. "We write regularly. She's doing beautifully for herself without me to weigh her down. She's much like you, Bev. She's never let anything stop her from seeking out what she wants."

"What does she do?" Will asked.

"She works at the Louvre, in Paris," Hannibal replied, setting his cutlery down on his empty plate, "Have you ever been?"

They both shook their heads. Will brought up his napkin to pat his lips dry. Hannibal gestured for the waiter.

"I do hope you can, sometime," he said, as their table was cleared. "Bedelia would be happy to guide you through the rooms not often open to the public."

"That would be amazing," Bev agreed, sitting back, "A woman who knows her worth explaining art to someone who has no idea how to look at it? Sounds like the perfect holiday."

Will caught a snort against his wrist, but barely. He gave Hannibal a helpless look. The other looked absolutely charmed.

"I'll be certain to tell her she'll have visitors, when you're able to have time away."

When the dessert cart rolled around, Bev made a longing sound. Hannibal gestured for her to take her pick.

"It is one thing to choose dinner, it is quite another to select an indulgence for someone else."

"That's dangerous, doctor," Bev replied, "I'm a notorious sweet tooth."

"Nothing would make me happier than to allow it to sate itself," Hannibal replied, before looking over at Will. When Will met his eyes he could barely hold the gaze, so he let his slip away to the selection of desserts and meditate there.

He was quiet, while Bev asked the waiter questions about each and every item available, and made small talk about his family as she did. In the end, she selected poached pears with chantilly cream, with iced cream on the side. Will glanced to Hannibal again.

When the waiter turned to Hannibal next, he let his eyes move from Will to look at the young man serving them instead. With a smile he ordered.

"Two of the French sponge with chocolate cream, if you would. Thank you."

“Very good, Sir,” the waiter bowed and set the selected desserts before him and Will. After taking their coffee order, he left without another word.

Will swallowed and considered the selection Hannibal had made. Will loved chocolate. He rarely could afford it, but he lived for it when he did. How had he known? Was it so clear? Why hadn’t he ordered for him what Bev had ordered for herself, assuming similar tastes? Why had he ordered for Will at all?

Why had Will let him?

There was a heaviness in the air, an electric charge that Will had not felt before in all his years. He had known from childhood where his interests lay, but never before had he narrowed those interests to a specific individual. Always it had been a vague and amorphous shadow in his mind, a hopeful dream that lingered when he woke.

Hannibal watched Will, his gaze intent, as he took a bite of his dessert. Will considered his own.

A contrary part of Will, the part of him that cared more about personal safety than about a few stolen minutes of dangerous half-flirtation, wanted to decline the dessert. To claim that Hannibal had chosen wrongly, that Will found French sponge abhorrent.

He wanted, more, to give in to whatever this madness was, and it was that desire that won. Will took a bite, closing his eyes around a burst of flavor. The sponge was soft, delicate, practically melting on Will’s tongue, and the chocolate gave a burst of sweetness that had him immediately reaching for another bite.

“It’s good,” Will said, after he’d swallowed half the treat, “Thank you. I wouldn’t have known what to pick.”

That wasn’t at all true, but Will felt the need to excuse Hannibal’s actions, to offer him an out. He had chosen for Will because Will had been indecisive, and for no other reason.

It helped that Will truly couldn’t figure out what other reasons there could have been. What Hannibal got out of it, what *Will* was meant to get out of it, why it gave Will a flutter of butterflies in his stomach.

The spell broke when Bev reached over with her spoon to scoop a piece of his cake for herself, and in answer, without thinking, Will reciprocated by stealing a bite of ice cream off her plate.

Conversation dwindled as the evening grew later and their plates emptied, just the final crumbs of cake and muddled melted ice cream remaining. It was Hannibal, in the end, who stood first and excused himself for the evening, though it was clear to all three of them that they felt too polite to make the first move.

He bowed to Bev and kissed her hand again, assuring her that now that he knew who was down in the engine room, he felt as safe as can be on their trans-Atlantic crossing. With Will,

he shook his hand firmly, as he had done every time previous, but he drew it up for a moment, as though he'd considered kissing his hand as well.

"Thank you both for your company," Hannibal told them, "I had a terrific evening."

"Likewise," Bev grinned, and slipped her arm through Will's as they all parted ways.

"I don't think I've ever felt more like a third wheel," she told him softly as they made their way down the stairs and to the second class level, "Maybe that time when you used to carry Medic around in a sling and always looked at him when you talked to me, but--"

"I'm so sorry," Will sounded breathless, flushed. His hands trembled as they tried to get the key into the door. Bev's hands were much more stable as they reached to take over. Once inside, she turned to him and set both hands to Will's face.

"Don't be sorry," she told him. Her smile was gentle, genuine, if a little sad, "You deserve to have someone look at you the way that man did tonight, Will. I want that for you."

"But--"

"But nothing," she leaned in to kiss the tip of his nose. "I'm about to get dressed in clothes that actually fit, and get ready for twelve hours of slaving away in hell. And *you* are going to get some rest."

"Bev--"

"Will," she ran a hand through his hair, tucking a curl behind his ear. "You have nothing to apologize for. I want this for you. I love you. The magic of love is that there are so many forms of it, and none of them need be a reflection of the other or cancel one another out. If this works out, or it doesn't, if you ever find a man, or you don't, the fact that I love you won't ever change."

Will swallowed. "I love you too," he whispered. And he meant it, with every fibre of his being.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

This, right here, was why he had married her. This moment, this sharp spark of humour between them. She was smart as a whip, clever. She knew him inside and out. He regretted, sometimes, that he could not love her the way a husband should love his wife, but then, she would not have wanted him to.

Chapter Notes

A mild warning for this one, loves, we're discussion menstruation/endo pains and drug use.

Though Will's position on the ship was quite high, and did not involve as much manual labour as Bev's, it was still a job. There was still much to be done, from the tip of the stern all the way down to the lowest part of the hull.

As such, he did not see Hannibal at all the day after they dined together, nor the day after that. On the third day that passed, they only had time to greet each other, Will exiting the smoking room and Hannibal going in. Will had stopped short, unexpectedly flustered, and given Hannibal a sharp nod.

"Doctor Lecter."

"Mister Graham," Hannibal said warmly, his smile bright. Will did not color, but it was a very near thing. "How lovely to see you. I don't suppose you..." he trailed off, invitingly.

"Busy," Will confirmed, shaking his head. "Sorry. Good to see you, though."

He was gone before Hannibal could say something else, and perhaps arrest his attention. He did not pass Hannibal again that day.

Three days was a lot of time to think, to reconsider, to come to a decision and then discard it entirely. There was, of course, the obvious possibility that Will had imagined any queerness to Hannibal, in his desperation after so many years of Will being the only person he knew who was at all bent.

Perhaps he was just polite, perhaps his refinement came across as feminized and delicate, and Will had read it wrong. Perhaps, in his ordering for Will when it came to dessert, Will had

just taken so long to choose on his own that it had gotten awkward, and Hannibal had had no choice but to make the decision for him.

Perhaps it was becoming harder to lie to himself than Will had thought.

Often, he lay awake in his bunk, Bev asleep across from him, and Medic snoring at his feet, and wondered what it would be like to take Hannibal up on his offer of a private drink. Would they take it in his bedroom, or the sitting room? Would Hannibal order wine and cognac down to his room or have something in his suitcases already prepared to share with Will?

Sometimes, he couldn't sleep at all; his body aching with need, his knees drawn up and his cock pressed hard against them as he rubbed, slow and deliberate, to ease his desires down again.

They were a week into the ten-day voyage when their work schedules finally lined up, somewhat; Bev now worked seven til seven, and Will was on from late morning to late evening. If anything, this made things *harder* for Will, because Bev listened when he talked, and worse, she talked back.

"I'm not naive you know," Bev pointed out their first evening properly shared together, "I can *hear you* when you're wanking at night."

"*Bev!*"

"What? It's only natural," Bev replied, but she was grinning. Medic shoved his egg shaped head against her arm and she lifted it to let the chubby dog climb into her lap and make himself comfortable. "What I'm *saying*, is that you're allowed to be interested in someone who's interested in you. You should be interested."

"But *why is he interested in me?*" Will asked helplessly. Bev shrugged.

"Not a clue. You're the most boring man alive."

Will snorted and shook his head. "You and I, we're the same class. We grew up in grime and dragged ourselves out of it."

"We clean up good."

"That we do," Will grinned. "But Hannibal did *not*. He's a man of *means*, and I don't think he understands that that will always be a barrier between us."

"Why?"

"Because money always is."

"Then don't talk about money," Bev shrugged again, sitting back against the wall her bunk pressed against. "Talk about your lives, your struggles, your successes. Talk about Medic. Talk about how you get *major* boners for the man every goddamn night and make me jealous."

Will blinked. “A-are you really?”

Bev threw a pillow at him.

This, right here, was why he had married her. This moment, this sharp spark of humour between them. She was smart as a whip, clever. She knew him inside and out. He regretted, sometimes, that he could not love her the way a husband *should* love his wife, but then, she would not have wanted him to.

Still, Will’s bravery began and ended with Bev. He could discuss it with her, occasionally venturing into details that made his cheeks heat, but the words would not come outside these walls. He could not make himself seek out Hannibal, invite him to dinner, to a drink.

Leave it to Bev, as always, to take things out of his hands the very next day.

Most every woman took ill regularly, of course. Usually, those in their economic circle grinned and bore it; the children could not be put away until mother felt better, the home would not mind itself, the jobs that were available to poorer women would not wait patiently for their innards to settle.

Beverly was both blessed and cursed. Blessed, in that Will’s position and good standing with the captain afforded her a bit more leeway than most. Cursed, in that she needed every inch of that leeway.

Bev’s monthly illness did not take her the way it took most women. There was, from what Will could tell, always a soreness and discomfort, a certain lethargy that captured them, especially in the first days. But Bev...

She was already whimpering when Will woke that morning, her entire body wrapped around the thin pillow she’d been afforded. Will offered her his own for her head, hands hovering uselessly above her.

“I’ll find someone to cover for you,” he said. “Is it better or worse than last month’s?”

“Worse,” Bev moaned. “Don’t let Anderson do it, he’ll fuck it all up.”

Will laughed, a gentle but whispered sound, and stroked her hair from her face. It had stuck to her forehead in the night, when the cold sweat overcame her. When he bent down to kiss her temple, Bev whimpered a little louder and reached out to curl her hand in Will’s shirt. God, how he wished he could stay and help her through it, but unless he himself was poorly, he never took time off work. He hoarded his favors like gold, and only cashed them in for Bev.

“What do you need?”

“Water?” Bev mumbled, “God, everything hurts.”

“Do you have--”

"I don't know," Bev moaned, turning her face into the pillow. Will sighed, chewing his lip. Bev had always 'made do' during her monthly bleeding, but more than once she'd fallen sick right after; bladder problems, difficulty moving, almost constant muscle cramps in her abdomen. Once they'd both found work on the Campania, she'd been able to afford more 'luxurious' items such as Lister Towels, but they only had so many. More often than not, Bev kept their old shirts and rags and waddled about for a few days until it passed.

That was when she could actually move.

"I'll get water," Will promised her, "and a bottle for your stomach."

If Bev heard him, she didn't reply, so Will donned his civilian clothes and left their room. His own shift didn't start for several hours yet, but he had work to do, to make sure that Bev's absence wasn't felt-- quite literally, for the boilers-- on the ship for a few days.

Captain Wilson didn't need to be notified; for all intents and purposes, Bev didn't appear on his radar, and if she ever did, then the ship was in dire straits. However, since Bev held the highest rank in the boiler room, it was the engineers that Will had to plead with for cover. The problem was that while they were hardy men who considered bleeding wounds 'mere scratches', the bare mention of 'women's problems' sent them running for the hills. It took two packs of tobacco and a promise of a bottle of whiskey to get one of the head engineers to give up his day off for Bev. Will was more than happy to pay it.

After that, Will was racing to the medical bay, and begging the pharmacist for Lister Towels and aspirin. He borrowed a hot water bottle from one of the stewards-- his was more modern than the ones available at the medical bay-- and a woolen scarf from one of the maids, and nearly threw himself down the corridor to get to Bev again.

He found her bent over a chamber pot, shaking, the remnants of last night's dinner within. Medic sat at her side, unsure of how to help, and gently rubbed his flat head against her arm. Will moved the pot, filled a cup with water, and passed it and the aspirin to Bev to take.

"I made a," Bev caught a hiccup against her hand. "Mess."

Will glanced to the scrunched up linens, and lifted the blankets to see the blood stain beneath. He let them drop again.

"Sleep in mine," he told her. "I'll get fresh linens from Claire and change them when I come down again. I brought some towels."

Bev sobbed once, and reached out for him again, pressing her forehead to Will's sternum when he stepped close, his arms gentle around her. "I don't deserve you."

"You deserve the earth and the goddamn moon for putting up with me," Will replied, bending to kiss the top of her head. "Now, up."

He let Bev change her clothes and put on the towels as he stripped the bed and flipped the mattress. He let the tap run until the water was steaming, and filled the hot water bottle before wrapping it in the scarf.

He'd been with Bev her entire life, they'd grown up almost as siblings, as best friends. Will had been with her through every painful monthly cycle, had never known how to help beyond what Bev could tell him when she was coherent again-- it wasn't as though he could have asked her mother, and his own was long gone before Bev had even come into his life. He knew that heat helped, that stroking her back and her hair, giving her water, letting her cry, offering a pot for her to be sick in, should she need to, and occasionally just leaving her alone were things he could offer. But they always felt paltry.

Once he had Bev bundled up in his bed, Medic laying heavily over her side, head between his paws, looking very concerned, Will gathered the dirty linens and made his way to the laundry room. One of the young women there, Claire, had worked at the inn they used to live above, and she and Bev had become close. When a position had opened up on the Campania in the laundry room, Bev had pulled some strings. She took the linens without a word and winked at Will, before tapping her finger against her cheek until he kissed there.

"Godsend," he told her.

When Will checked his watch, time had run away from him. He managed to get back to their room and change into his uniform just in time for his shift to start. But try as he might, he was completely distracted.

There wasn't anything more he could do for Bev than what he was doing now. There was nothing either of them could do, really, other than wait for it to pass. She was safe. She was in bed, with water on hand, in fresh, clean linens. She had her towels, her aspirin, her heat. Standing by the bedside fretting over her was only going to add stress to her suffering.

And yet Will worried. He wandered the halls almost aimlessly, floating between his duties more than he walked. He could not seem to get his head on straight. He was distant with the crew, more formal than he normally tended to be. He was sure they noticed, everyone must have noticed.

What sort of a husband could not comfort their wife in time of need? Certainly, Will failed in most husbandly duties, but this was one he felt he should have done better with. True, there was not much that *could* have been done for Bev, but he was certain there was *something*. If he was richer, he could afford for her to stay home, in a pretty little house. With a nursemaid to care for her, since he was fantasizing. He could afford better medicines than the paltry aspirin he received from the medic. He could bring her to the finest doctors the world had to offer. If only he had done better in life.

Doctors.

Will came to a stop in the middle of the third class hallway, his gaze far away. It was an imposition, certainly. And a risky one. Hannibal was a passenger, Will was staff. It was a boundary violation to even *consider* ...

But Hannibal liked Will, or at least, Will believed he did. And Beverly believed it, too. They were both typically good judges of character. Will would have trusted Beverly's judgement with his life. If Hannibal liked Will, felt any sort of fondness for him, then surely a small favor would not be out of the question.

And if it was, if this was the straw that broke the camel's back, if Hannibal complained to the captain about the demanding impertinence of his staff...

Well, Beverly was worth that sort of risk, wasn't she?

Will started walking. He continued on his rounds, but now he was no longer lingering half in his room and half outside of it, now he was entirely focused on one thing: finding Dr. Hannibal Lecter on the ship.

He missed his lunch break, and spent that time up in the first class areas, scouring the library, the smoking room, the billiards room... everywhere were men like Hannibal, and men entirely unlike him. Now that Will was so focused, and so clear-headed with his goal, it was easy to see; these men didn't look at Will, and when they did, they never looked him in the eye, the spoke to something over his shoulder when they addressed him, they called out *boy* to get his attention, when he was anything but. And Hannibal...

Hannibal.

The name alone felt like a balm to Will's exhausted mind. He needed to find the man, now, not only to help his wife, his best friend, his soul mate in almost every sense of the word, but also to hear him say his name, the most common name on earth, as though it meant something.

Hannibal was not taking luncheon on the open deck, nor on the covered one. He wasn't in the dining hall, he wasn't on the promenade. Will had almost given up hope, preparing to go to Hannibal's rooms and seek him out there, when he caught a glimpse of that familiar silhouette.

Hannibal was sitting near the lifeboats, one leg over the other, and a sketchpad balanced atop. Will watched, for a moment entirely entranced by the way the sea breeze moved Hannibal's hair, the way it tugged free silvery strands from where he'd tucked them behind an ear. He watched as Hannibal's hand moved over the page, quick, gentle motions that took up his entire concentration. Will felt like he'd just taken a huge swig of very good brandy; warm all over, a little uncoordinated. He felt *stupid*. He felt giddy.

"Doctor Lecter," he said as he approached, keeping his voice down so as not to startle the man, and when Hannibal looked up, and *smiled*, Will forgot how to breathe for a moment.

That moment passed.

"Will, it's a pleasure--"

"I'm afraid I must ask for your help," Will interrupted gently, "once more. I'm... I'm already so indebted--"

"What happened?" Hannibal unfolded from his position, tucking his sketchbook beneath one arm and his pencil into his pocket. "Is Medic unwell?"

“No,” Will swallowed, unable to look at him now that he’d gotten his attention, was *forcing him to aid him again*. “No, it’s... it’s Bev.”

“Your wife?” Hannibal asked, a look of surprise passing his features. He straightened to his full height. “Follow me, my supplies are in my room.”

He didn’t even ask what Will needed. He headed towards the inner halls of the ship, setting a brisk pace for Will to keep up with.

“I’m not sure there’s anything you can do,” Will admitted. “It’s why I haven’t approached the ship’s medic.”

“There’s always something to be done,” Hannibal assured him, “even if it’s just easing her rest. Why don’t you explain the problem as we walk?”

It was very nearly a brisk jog, rather than a walk, but Will certainly didn’t begrudge him the speed. He had thought of nothing but Bev for hours now. “It’s a... womanly affliction,” he admitted, cheeks coloring, voice dropping to a whisper though there was no one around to hear.

“Ah,” Hannibal said, without breaking his stride. “I see. Cramping of the stomach?”

“Yes,” Will said, “but it’s more than just that.”

“Nausea, I expect? And headaches?”

“She can’t keep anything down.”

They reached Hannibal’s room, but were in it for no more than a moment before they were out again, Hannibal’s bag in hand. He moved as if it was urgent, as if Bev was any other patient in need of care, a *paying* patient, and Will felt a rush of warm affection towards him.

“Can she stand?”

“If she has to, for a few moments.”

“Is this typical for her?”

“Nearly monthly, but not always this bad.”

Hannibal didn’t ask any more questions, he allowed Will to lead the way to the room he shared with Bev, and didn’t enter as Will did, but waited to be invited. From within, he heard nothing but a pained groan and a whimper, and Will’s words soothing and soft and muffled. They weren’t meant for him. When Will appeared at the door again, Hannibal followed him through.

Beverly was in Will’s bed, curled up around the hot water bottle, Medic at her back, stretched out to his fullest extent, keeping her warm there too. She was shaking, cold sweat beaded at

her brow, teeth gritted in agony. Hannibal set his medical bag to the empty bed and worked free his cufflinks to start folding his sleeves up.

“Mrs Graham,” he said gently, “Beverly, it’s Dr. Lecter. Will told me you were poorly, can you tell me where the pain is at its worst?”

Hannibal had lived with women growing up, he had been married for a time, and all had ranged across the spectrum when it came to their monthly bleed. Bedelia’s didn’t bother her beyond it being an inconvenience, but she’d told Hannibal that her mother had suffered terribly during hers. When Hannibal had started working specifically with pain, he’d heard starkly differing accounts between the medical field and the patients he treated.

Physicians whom Hannibal otherwise respected, claimed it to be nothing more than hysteria; nothing was medically *wrong* with these women. However, some of the women he treated told him it was a pain worse than childbirth, worse than anything at all.

Pain was not something one could fake; it was an expression universal to the human race.

“Stomach,” Bev ground out, tucking her knees up higher against her middle. “Just beneath... god it hurts.”

“Will you allow me to examine you, with your husband present?”

Bev nodded, blinking her eyes open and looking between the two of them. Hannibal turned to Will, saw the agony writ across his face as well, suffering alongside his spouse as though in doing so he could ease her burden.

“I will need you to unfold,” he said apologetically. Bev made a sound, soft and desperate, an aching little moan that cut off in the back of her throat. She could not avoid looking unwell in front of him, nor the pained sounds that beckoned at her tongue, but she still had her pride. She swallowed, her throat bobbing with the effort, and began to uncurl her legs with pained little pants.

Once she was stretched out, Hannibal eased her shirt up and her pants down, not so much as to infringe on her modesty, but enough to expose the flat plane of her stomach, bloated slightly now, and the dip of her hips. He heard footsteps, and Will was suddenly beside him.

“I will do her no harm,” Hannibal promised quietly. “I swore an oath.”

“I know that,” Will muttered, a flush to his cheeks, but he did not step away again. No matter, Hannibal was used to working with an audience.

Gently, Hannibal prodded at Beverly’s stomach. She sucked in a breath, tight and high, and he winced in sympathy. “Just a little more,” he coaxed. “Relax. If you tense, it will be worse.”

“It’s already worse,” she said. “Anything after this point just blurs together.”

For several moments, Hannibal didn’t speak, or ask Bev to. He set his fingers to her skin, too-hot with fever and pain, pressed only as much as he needed to, to get a response, to get his

answer. Beside him, Will pressed his fingers to his lips, and grasped his elbow with his other hand, clinging on.

“Are you experiencing nausea?”

“Yes.”

“Have you expelled today?”

“Haven’t eaten,” Bev ground out. Hannibal hummed, and gently took her wrist up to check her pulse.

“Have you taken anything for the pain?”

“Aspirin,” Will replied for her, “this morning. I got some from the medic.”

“Any change?”

Bev’s groan and shudder of pain was answer enough. Hannibal sighed, and turned to look up at Will for a moment before looking back to Bev.

“I can give you something for the pain,” he assured her, “and I am more than happy to, but I must ask if there is any chance that you may be pregnant.”

The room felt like it was ringing with the silence following that question, then Bev laughed, which surprised Hannibal somewhat.

“I apologize for being uncouth, but the question is of utmost importance.”

“Is it?” Will asked, and his voice sounded... high. Panicked, perhaps.

“Because if you are with child, you could be experiencing a miscarriage,” Hannibal told her gently. “Or a severe bleed, that may not lose you your baby, but will hinder me in what I can administer to you.”

Bev shook her head. “No.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes!” Bev’s answer was a mix of a snap and a cry. She grabbed her hair with one hand and yanked, trying to divert the pain from her abdomen. “Yes, *yes*, I’m certain, I’m *fucking* certain! You need to have *sex* to get pregnant!”

Hannibal blinked at her, mouth open in genuine shock before he turned to Will. Perhaps, in her pain, she’d misspoken.

But Will’s expression spoke volumes.

She hadn’t misspoken.

Well. That certainly was something to think about.

There were many reasons a married couple might refrain from intimacy. Hannibal considered and discarded most of them, as he searched through his vials and prepared a syringe. There was no bad blood here, no resentment or disgust. He saw a true, genuine love between the Grahams, in every aspect of how they interacted with each other.

There were considerably *fewer* reasons a *happy* couple might refrain from intimacy. This new information added a heavy weight to speculations Hannibal held about Will. Perhaps later, when he did not have a patient to tend to, he could give those speculations the attention they deserved.

Beverly held still for him, as he found a vein in the crook of her arm and pierced it deftly. It was *Will* who made a sound, a sharp inhalation. He had gone very pale at the sight of the needle, but he did not look away from Bev. Protective to the core, a far more honorable man than most.

“You may feel your heart racing, a little shortness of breath, perhaps a rush of adrenaline or a sensation of overwhelming pleasure,” Hannibal explained. “This is all perfectly normal, though you should send Will to find me if your breathing becomes uneven, or your pulse does not ease in a few hours.”

Bev nodded weakly, her hair plastered to her face, her eyes already glazed from the pain.

And then... they widened, she took a deep gasping breath and pressed a hand to her stomach. Next to Hannibal, Will shifted, as though he wanted to step closer and stop this, or help, or do *something*. Hannibal moved to take his hand and hold it-- and thus, Will himself-- still.

On the bed, Bev lay back and stared at the ceiling, her eyes still open wide, both of her hands now down at her stomach, rubbing there in slow, pensive circles. Then she smiled, and closed her eyes, and pressed a hand to her face instead.

“God, that feels... *shit*,” she puffed out a breath, as close to a laugh as she could, and turned to look at Hannibal. “It’s just *gone*.”

Hannibal gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I’m pleased to hear it. I will return in a few hours to check on you,” he promised. “And I will write a recommendation for you to bring to a doctor back home.”

“We can’t afford it,” she said with a sigh. “Not more than this visit, I’m sorry. But thank you for your offer.”

“Then I shall also write a letter to a friend and send you his way, to make sure that you can.” Hannibal told her, shaking his head when Bev looked as though she was going to argue. For the moment, she seemed to decide against it and just nodded, closing her eyes and turning her head to the side.

Hannibal stood, his hand still clasping Will’s, and licked his lips. He drew his thumb up over Will’s wrist, and down again, before letting his hand go.

“Please don’t hesitate to find me should you need me again,” he told Will quietly, stepping away so they didn’t bother Bev with their conversation. “It is rare that such pain control is needed monthly, but if you say it’s always been so cruel to her--”

“Always,” Will replied, his voice a little rough, eyes a little wet.

“Then I will administer it as needed, and show her, or you both, how to do so yourselves when we part ways.”

“You needn’t--”

“Will,” Hannibal watched the way Will’s throat worked as he swallowed, how he closed his eyes, brows drawn, before opening them again. He set his fingers beneath Will’s chin and gently lifted it. “Let me help you.”

Wide-eyed, Will let out a breathless, “alright.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

“What I want is to have a drink with you,” Will said. It seemed to exhaust all of his energy to say so. His shoulders sank from their tense position, and he let out a quiet sigh.

Hannibal allowed himself to reach out, gently freeing the bottle from Will’s grasp. Will didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands once they were empty; he clenched and unclenched them as if searching for something to hold.

“Have a seat, then,” Hannibal said. “I’ll pour.”

Chapter Notes

The penultimate chapter!!

Hannibal checked in on his patient several more times that day. He had been given permission by Beverly and Will both to enter their room as needed, but every time he took his time to knock and listen for an answer before coming in.

Throughout the day, he treated Bev with small doses of cocaine and took thorough notes of her sensations and experiences. He listened carefully when she explained how this pain had haunted her mother and grandmother and had been passed down to her, how she felt as though she was carrying the culmination of their pain along with her own, as every month it grew worse and worse.

He did not consider her worries unfounded. He did not call her hysterical.

Instead, he spoke to her about his studies in medicine, and later in the field of pain prevention in particular. He explained what he was doing with the drug and why, and where he was headed when they reached New York.

In turn, she told him about her life, her life with Will, their plans for the future. Hannibal listened.

He listened to her concerns that Will was working himself to the bone on her behalf, he listened when she confided in him that she didn’t know how to express to him that his sacrifice wasn’t needed, that she loved him with all her heart regardless of the money they

made or the places they lived. He promised to remain silent as the grave when she realized that in her pain and later under the influence of her pain relief, she'd spoken so candidly.

He took Medic out on deck to relieve himself, assured Bev that it was no trouble at all to clean up after him, and gave the pup his own due attention. He was healing well from his wound, allowed Hannibal to dress it in a clean bandage as Bev held him and scratched behind his ears.

When Will returned to their room that evening, looking dishevelled and exhausted, Hannibal greeted him at the door, and after giving him his full report in regards to Bev's health, excused himself.

Hannibal found that he didn't have the stomach for dinner; not due to his attentions to his patient all day, but due to the fact that he had so much to think about after conversing with her.

He had assumed Will to be as gruff as his exterior and upbringing suggested he was; he'd stereotyped him as a man of bad language and worse education, had almost written him off entirely except that the change in him, from slovenly mechanic to put-together quartermaster, had been so fascinating.

Hannibal lived for fascination, for the pull of a creature whose inner gears ticked away, invisible to him. He liked to pry people apart, to investigate the things that added up to make them human. It had been a very long time since someone had drawn him to them.

And so Hannibal had watched, had waited, had pounced on every opportunity to insert himself into Will's life. Will had taken him with ill-grace, at first. He seemed more mistrusting than any man might have a need to be, as though Hannibal was a danger to him. And perhaps he was. Perhaps they were both dangers to each other, in the same way.

Hannibal wanted Will Graham. He had not, at first, and then the spark had been one of curious lust, but now, Hannibal was covetous. Beneath a stony outer layer, Will held vulnerability close to his heart. He had compassion, an enviable quality. He loved quite fiercely, given the chance, though it was clear his love for his wife was a chaste one.

Will was like him, Hannibal was certain of it. They were both bent the same way, a little queer, a little bit different. Hannibal had been blessed with an encouraging wife, a wealth of money, and time to spare. He had wandered cities seeking what he wanted, and it had made him bold, unafraid of his own desires.

For the Grahams, desire seemed to be a foreign thing. It was quite possible that Will still held his innocence in its entirety, even at his age. Hannibal had not spent much time in Liverpool, but it did not seem to hold the same advantages Paris had held. Certainly, they were not as abundant or as easy to find. And Will was limited on time, even more limited on money. If another man had had him, it would only have been once or twice.

Perhaps Hannibal was wrong, perhaps Will had a thriving and adventurous sex life, but Hannibal was very rarely wrong. He knew how to read such things.

He settled into one of the chairs by the windows and watched the sun set over the flat and empty ocean, and set his mind adrift upon it.

Certainly, there was lust there; Hannibal knew what he liked, what he wanted, but there was more. To him, Will appeared as the boys in Montmartre, seeking comfort, seeking protection, as well as sexual fulfilment. To Hannibal, Will was not a creature of amorous passion, but a flower in need of care and patience before he opened up and revealed himself. To Hannibal, he was still a boy trapped in the mindset of a man.

And while Hannibal wanted nothing more than to take Will into his arms and shower him with gifts and pleasures, he knew that Will would run from such an onslaught of affection. If he offered too much, he would lose him.

A knock on the door disrupted Hannibal's thoughts. It wasn't immediately followed by the gentle call of a stewardess or steward apologizing for the intrusion, so Hannibal gave himself a moment to adjust his coat before opening the door.

And there stood Will Graham, hair a little damp from a bath, clothes that looked threadbare and worn, but well loved and tended to upon his frame, and a bottle of scotch in his hands.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Will murmured, his eyes set just over Hannibal's shoulder, not quite meeting them. "But I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for my family."

"It was my pleasure," Hannibal replied, his head inclined and eyes up on Will's, trying to catch his gaze. To his surprise, Will laughed, a breathy and soft thing, and shook his head.

"I know a bottle will hardly suffice as thanks but..." he chewed his lip and took a deep breath. And then he met Hannibal's eyes, just briefly, but enough that Hannibal's pulse picked up speed just a little. "May I come in?"

Perhaps there would be coyness to him yet. It might not have been intentional-- purposeful flirtation seemed a step beyond Will's power-- but it was there. Just underneath the surface, a boy waiting to break free. Hannibal stepped to the side.

"Of course," he said softly. He could see the effect his voice had on Will, now that he was looking closely. He had thought he was already looking closely, but even when he had all his attention on Will, he had only ever seen what Will wanted him to see. Now, there was no more hiding. Will had opened the door, let Hannibal into his life, and there was no going back from that.

Hannibal's room held a little table, but Will stood in the middle of the room, scotch clutched tightly in his hand. He looked very lost, uncertainty a shadow over his features. Hannibal warred with his own innate urge to comfort, to guide. Will had to come to him, had to take that last step.

"I don't know how to even begin thanking you," Will said, his voice soft, fragile. The rawness he emanated was painful to listen to. Here was a man unaccustomed to having good things come his way, unaccustomed to being found deserving. Here was longing, and Hannibal matched it.

“You don’t have to.”

“No, I do,” Will insisted. “I really do. What you did for Bev... God, I’ve spent years helpless, trying to ease her pain, and you come in and set it to rights in five minutes. And yet you want nothing in return?”

“I took an oath,” Hannibal reminded him. “Medicine has been my passion from a young age, and once I discovered the possibilities, endless, *endless* possibilities, Will, of treating pain, removing it, easing people into comfort... I do not feel that what I have done is a burden upon my person or my time. It was truly a pleasure.”

Will remained still a moment longer, unsure of how to reply to that, what to even do. But he wasn’t running for the door, wasn’t leaving the bottle behind and making a hurried exit. Something had snapped apparently, something within him that had been holding back a flood of worries and woes, when he’d seen Hannibal tend to his wife, when Bev had admitted so candidly that their married life was without intimate connection.

The next breath Will took seemed to straighten his shoulders a little.

He stepped just close enough to the table to set the bottle down upon it, though his hand remained at the neck, just caressing the glass.

“All my life I’ve felt like I have been given a set of rules to follow that I do not conform to, that I am meant to be a person I cannot be, and the frustration of that has been crippling some days.” Will said quietly. He drew a hand through his hair and laughed again, that breathless, lovely sound that made Hannibal want to reach out and taste it from his lips.

He didn’t move, he wouldn’t, until Will invited him to, until Will opened that door.

“I told Bev from the beginning that I’d be a useless husband,”

“Will--”

“Please,” Will chewed his lip, he didn’t look at Hannibal, but his tone begged him to be quiet. “Please I just... I need to say this before I swallow it down again and keep it trapped.”

Hannibal nodded and stepped back, taking a seat in the chair he’d vacated to let Will into the room. The second chair was close, the invitation to join him evident without words being spoken. Will, however, didn’t move from his place near the table.

“I told her that I wouldn’t give her the life she deserved, the comforts she deserved. I told her we wouldn’t ever have a family... and in that vulnerability I felt closer and closer to my best friend. We have had a good life, Hannibal, please don’t think we haven’t. My love for Bev is unmatched to any other, she’s my reason for being, the person I *want* to see when I finish the day, but she is also not... not someone I had wanted in a spouse,”

Will’s words choked him a moment, and Hannibal didn’t move to interrupt. He understood now what Will was doing, coming here with a bottle of scotch as an excuse. He was thanking

Hannibal in the only way he knew how, and in the only way that mattered to them both: he was opening up. He was letting someone in.

“What I wanted,” he began, and then the words seemed to strangle themselves within him. He choked on them, silent and breathless, and when his eyes met Hannibal’s, Hannibal could see fear.

“I never wanted to be married,” Will said, after a moment of silence so thick it was palpable. This attempt at speech went better; he no longer seemed to stumble over words that troubled him. “I had always intended to live the life of a bachelor. I would have enjoyed being married to my work. I don’t... I can never *regret* Bev, not ever, but what I wanted...”

At his side, Will clenched his fists. His knuckles were white from the effort, and Hannibal wanted very badly to reach for him.

“What I want is to have a drink with you,” Will said. It seemed to exhaust all of his energy to say so. His shoulders sank from their tense position, and he let out a quiet sigh.

Hannibal allowed himself to reach out, gently freeing the bottle from Will’s grasp. Will didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands once they were empty; he clenched and unclenched them as if searching for something to hold.

“Have a seat, then,” Hannibal said. “I’ll pour.”

Will sank into the chair, heavy and clumsy. It was endearing, to see him put so much energy towards Hannibal. Everything about Will Graham was endearing, even when it shouldn’t have been.

Will drank the first glass down like a shot, wincing at the burn after, and Hannibal hummed, before pouring him another.

“Slow,” he instructed, taking his own glass up as though all Will needed to do was see how it was done. When Will obeyed, Hannibal stood up and went to the small kitchen, filling two glasses with water and retrieving a heavy fruit cake he’d packed for his journey. He’d planned it as a gift to one of his colleagues, but he was certain it would be much more appreciated now. Especially since Will most likely had work in the morning and needed to remain sober.

For a while, they merely sat together; Will cradling his glass, and Hannibal watching him. Then, he cut a piece of the cake and passed it to Will, smiling when he took it with hesitant fingers.

“My wife and I also had an unconventional marriage,” Hannibal said, as Will put the cake into his mouth and chewed. “Though differently unconventional to yours. We are both open-minded people, allowed to grow up with the privilege of travel and free time.” he sat back and swirled his scotch in his glass for a moment, before allowing a smile to slip onto his lips. “Bedelia is a strong woman. A woman who scoffs at society’s inherent obsession with placing her in a submissive role. I believe that’s why we were so drawn to each other in the beginning; we were both looking for a partner, an equal.”

Will took another gentle sip of his whiskey, eyes in the middle distance. He wasn't looking at Hannibal, but just past him, as though he were watching the scene play out as Hannibal narrated it. An ache that Hannibal could almost taste coming off of Will in waves.

"It became abundantly clear, however, that we could not meet each other's every need." Hannibal continued after a moment. "Our intimacy never waned, but there was only so much that Bedelia was willing to bend on, and more that I wanted. She could not give it to me, and so I sought elsewhere."

Hannibal took a deep breath and held it, waiting for the tick in Will's features to shift his eyes to him, curious, as anyone would be, but also desperate. Seeking an answer he didn't even know he needed, to a question he'd never dared ask himself.

"Once, I took a week away, I went to a part of Paris that catered to my tastes, and I enjoyed the company of men," he said.

Will nearly choked on his mouthful, hastily bringing the glass of water to his lips to clear his throat. When he looked at Hannibal again, his cheeks were so beautifully flushed, his expression so innocently shocked...

"I wrote to my wife, expressing my desire to extend my time away, and she supported the decision," Hannibal said, taking a small sip of the alcohol and letting it burn his tongue before swallowing. "I learned so much about myself, those days that I was in the company of beautiful young men who wanted my body as desperately as I wanted theirs. Who needed to feel comfort from a figure usually out of their reach outside of the walls of the lodgings we shared."

Hannibal paused a moment, just watching Will's emotions write themselves across his features. He saw longing. He saw aching, painful longing writ across his features so clearly, so plainly... he wanted to reach out, he wanted to bring Will comfort, but the line they were walking was a delicate one, one wrong move, one slipped sentence, and Will could bolt up the doors he'd allowed to swing open.

So, Hannibal bared himself just a little more, instead.

"It was different from what I had with Bedelia," he explained. "The boys of Paris... Our relationship was largely transactional. They needed to be cared for, I needed to care for someone. Bedelia was always so staunchly independent. She would not have welcomed much fussing."

Will drew in a breath, a whisper of a gasp in the quiet of the room. Hannibal pressed onward.

"I sought an opportunity to look after someone, to provide for them in a way I could not in my marriage."

"Did you want to?" Will asked, looking shocked at his own daring. Shocked, perhaps, at the fact that he hadn't fled the room yet.

“Yes and no,” Hannibal said. “Bedelia would never have allowed it, and I wanted nothing more for her than that she should have everything she wanted. She would not have been happy to have so much of my attention, and it would not have sated my desires to force it upon her.”

Will took a sip of his drink, too large, too deep. Hannibal held himself back, knowing that to reach out would be to shatter this peace between them.

“Were I to do it over again, however, I would seek someone more compatible.” Hannibal poured himself another measure, topping off Will’s glass as well. “My desires haven’t changed. I would like, one day, to be the shoulder someone leans on. The sturdy rock in their life, that they may cling to in times of crisis.”

Will did not say anything for a long while, instead choosing to seek comfort in the warm amber in his glass. Hannibal watched him, watched his hands against the glass, the slight tremor that ran through his body once in a while as Will processed everything Hannibal had told him.

He supposed that if nothing else, he was incredibly grateful for the fact that Will was still here, that he hadn’t vacated his seat and left the room at the first sign of vulnerability. He wondered what Will was thinking, what was going through his mind. He wanted so much to ask him about it, to tease free his own desires and needs, show him that they so perfectly matched his own.

Hannibal was certain that if Will allowed himself to feel, to truly *feel* the things that he had been taught to fear...

Well.

Hannibal felt that his own search was over, with the man beside him. It ended and began with Will Graham.

“There is no shame in human desire, Will,” Hannibal murmured, tilting his head until it rested against his shoulder. “There is no shame in wanting what you want, or asking for it from others that share your proclivities.”

Will swallowed thickly and flicked his eyes to Hannibal again, meeting them for a long, long time. Then he blinked, and sighed, and looked down at his drink again before bringing the glass to his lips and emptying it.

“The Campania docks in a few days.” Will pointed out carefully. The drink had roughened his voice to something that sent shivers over Hannibal’s skin. “You’ll get off, and I’ll stay on, overseeing the refueling, the cleaning. When the ship sets sail again, it will leave you behind.”

“I have no intention of staying in America long. Eventually, I will return to Liverpool.” Hannibal replied.

“Eventually,” Will shook his head. “Eventually, if you remember me at all. A man like you, you could have... You’ve been places I’ll never see, Hannibal. You know where to look, to find what you want. You have a great deal to choose from. And I. I am very happily married.”

“Are you?” Hannibal asked. Will paled, then colored, staring down at his empty glass with unseeing eyes.

“I am,” he said quietly, to the melting ice at the bottom. He sounded more uncertain than Hannibal had ever heard him.

If Will would let him, if Will would concede to his care, Hannibal would coax that insecurity from him, until there was nothing more. He would see Will grow to view Hannibal’s attention as his *right*.

But for now, Hannibal could only ease forward, careful, slow. He reached for Will, across the table, as though approaching a skittish animal. Will certainly froze like one, wide eyed, scarcely breathing as Hannibal laid his hand over Will’s.

They lingered there a moment, still, each staring at the other.

“You are a fascination, Will Graham,” Hannibal said. “I should like to indulge in your company a little more.”

“We dock in a few days,” Will rasped. “I’m very busy.”

“I can work around that. And after...” Hannibal lifted Will’s hand from the table. Will’s eyes followed him, wide, rapt. “I would wait,” he said. “You needn’t worry that I might grow bored in the times you are at sea. I am a very patient man, and used to entertaining myself.”

Cards on the table. Hannibal tilted his head and brushed a soft kiss against the very center of Will’s palm. Will let him, with nothing more than a sharp, shuddering gasp, as if he could scarcely believe it himself.

“Let me wait for you,” Hannibal coaxed.

Just a hair too far. Will swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing, and then rose from the table in a move so quick it nearly toppled his chair.

“I’m, I’m sorry,” Will stammered, righting it again. “It’s just... I have to get back to Beverly. Have to check on her. My wife.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, more pleading than he’d meant to sound. Will looked wounded.

“I... Perhaps we can have another drink, before the Campagnia docks. In one of the lounges,” he added, hurrying himself backwards towards the door. He disappeared through it, gone before Hannibal could stop him, leaving nothing but the taste of their mutual yearning behind.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Hannibal had had men before.

The thought bloomed and blazed bright like the cherry at the end of Will's cigarette, hurt as badly as if he'd put that light out against his own flesh. A punch of ardent hunger, aching and raw.

Hannibal had men.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU FOR COMING ON THIS JOURNEY WITH US AND THE BOYS, IT'S JUST BEGINNING!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bev gave Will a look when he returned, searching and curious. He nearly spun on his heel and walked right back out, just to avoid her rendition of the Spanish Inquisition.

“What’d he say?”

“Who?” Will asked, his tone forcibly mild, as if they discussed nothing more alarming than the weather.

Bev bit her lip, a considering gesture, clearly debating with herself whether she ought to press the issue. Will sincerely hoped she didn’t. He needed to get away, to go somewhere quiet and breathe in the salt air and simply...exist. Alone. *Safe*. Shielded.

“Will, you look like you’ve seen the spirit of Old Price.”

If she’d hoped to distract him from his stresses, she’d succeeded. Will gave her a sour look.

“The *Campania* is *not* haunted,” he said stiffly, “And if I find it’s *you* who’s been spreading that rumour to the new hires--”

“Ooh, gonna dock my wages, sir?” Bev teased, “*Every* ship carries spirits, Will, that’s just a fact.”

For a moment, Will lost himself to it, the familiar banter, it had always been an easy rhythm between them, that back and forth. He let his wife - his best friend - pull him back from the brink of panic. They sniped at each other, each fighting back beaming smiles, until the clock began to chime.

“Well, that’s me told,” Bev said, stretching with a groan, “Off to the pits of hell again. Try and get some sleep, won’t you?”

“No,” Will shook his head, “You’re off the next two days.”

“Will--”

“Two days,” Will repeated, stepping closer and stroking her hair from her face. She’d taken a bath in the time Will had been with Hannibal, and it smelled sweet. Will took a moment to breathe her in, a familiar smell that spoke of comfort and safety and *constancy*.

“We can’t afford two days, Will.”

“We can afford two days,” Will murmured, wrapping his arms around her as she sighed and nuzzled against his sternum. Then, with a grumble, she relented.

“*Fine*,” she mumbled, pulling back and giving Will a look, “But you take the kid out then. I barely made it to the tub without falling over, I’m not sure I could manage the stairs.”

“Three days,” Will amended, earning a snort from his wife, “If you keep that up.”

They argued gently a while longer, until Bev’s eyes started to close and she laid back in Will’s bed, tugging the blankets up. He kissed her forehead, she returned the gesture against the soft stubble of his cheek before turning to seek her rest, facing the shadowed side of the wall. Once Bev’s breathing had evened in slumber, Will reached for his coat and softly called Medic to him.

There were parts of the ship off-limits to passengers, and Will made his way towards one such hideaway once Medic had done his business and Will had disposed of it overboard. They sequestered themselves away in a lifeboat, Will spread out on his back to watch the stars blink into existence, one by one, and Medic sprawled companionably against his side.

Hannibal had offered him something deadly, he thought. Something that would be addictive, that he would not be able to exist without once had. If Will got a taste of it he could not imagine simply returning to the routine mask of his previous - *normal* - life, suppressing his desires when he might know what it was to sate them instead.

He tried to summon righteous anger he knew should be there, draw on the voice that might paint and tar Hannibal as a peddler of addictive substances, an opportunist, sowing destruction for his own amusement and gain. He’d given Bev *cocaine* for God’s sake! And yet... no anger rose to meet the call of such thoughts. Not when he’d seen how relieved Bev had looked, how relaxed she had been after just one dose of the drug. He’d never seen her calm so quickly, had never seen pain leave her features so entirely as then. He couldn’t hate Hannibal for that, not ever.

But for the rest...

For sharing with Will such debauchery about his time in Paris, for drawing Will in, tempting him closer, for the press of warm lips scorching still against his palm...

Will drew his knees up and rolled to the side, hand fumbling for a cigarette in his pocket and the lighter to go with. He lit up with a shaky sigh and let the tobacco burn his throat.

For a few minutes he let that ground him, focused solely on the pattern of drawing in slow, rhythmic breaths. Burn. Breathe. Burn....Breathe.

Hannibal had had men before.

The thought bloomed and blazed bright like the cherry at the end of Will's cigarette, hurt as badly as if he'd put that light out against his own flesh. A punch of ardent hunger, aching and raw.

Hannibal had men.

Boys, he'd called them, and Will tried to compare himself to the sort of pretty, fresh-faced boys he saw join the crew. All of them new to adulthood, some of them newly married and fumbling through the beginnings of the intricacies of relationships. Many of them moved with a sort of false bravado, a cockiness that came with the surety of youth.

Will tried to picture himself at the same age. He'd been... far less confident. Nervous, every day a ticking clock counting down to starvation and more time only purchased with ceaseless toil. He'd been scrambling to provide for Bev, he could not have gone to the sort of places Hannibal frequented, put on the sort of coyness Hannibal had been exposed to.

There was, all in all, no reason Hannibal should want him, when those he'd wanted before had been full of youthful vigor and beauty.

But Hannibal...he looked at Will as though he were still that youthful, as though he were not pushing forty, exhausted, well past his prime - if there had ever been a prime. He'd looked at Will as he'd spoken as though Will were the epitome of Hannibal's fantasies, as though for Will he would stop time itself.

The cigarette burned too low, singeing Will's fingers and his bottom lip as he inhaled, a low curse startling from him before he tossed it aside. He crushed the smoldering remains under his heel and flopped back in the boat once more, bringing a hand up to scrub over tired eyes.

They needed to be cared for; I needed to care for someone.

Goddammit. Those words sent shivers down Will's spine, had curled themselves low in his stomach, and squeezed his lungs until he could barely breathe - *Why?*

He didn't need looking after, he was a *man*, he was *married*, in charge of his household, providing for his wife...

But he wasn't. He hadn't been, not ever. The more Will thought about it, the more he knew, with a sinking dread, that it was Bev who looked after him. Bev who made sure he ate, who made sure he rested even a few hours every night. Bev who worked alongside Will so they didn't starve, Bev who had stepped in to get people to back off when Will hadn't the fortitude or tolerance for their endless barrage of emotions. Bev was the protector, and Will was...

Will was lost.

Without her he would be adrift - utterly and completely.

Yet it was Bev who was gently pushing him to allow this courtship, encouraging him to accept the attentions and kindnesses of this rich man. It was Bev who was guiding him towards this; and she would never lead him astray, Will knew that to the depths of his soul, he trusted her with his life.

It still felt like a kind of betrayal. Bev deserved better. She deserved a husband who would want her, who would worship her. She did not have, and never had, any desire to be *wanted*, yet she deserved someone who *could*. Someone who worked the way every man was supposed to work, someone who was not just the slightest bit bent.

She wouldn't care. Will knew that. She *wanted* this for him, and had said as much. Loyalty to Bev was an easy out. If he wanted to be a respectable husband, if he was worried about what Bev would think, then he couldn't *possibly* see Hannibal the way Hannibal wanted, the choice would be out of his hands and who could fault him for that?

If it was *Will's* choice, truly his, then he was *choosing* to walk away. *Choosing* to turn his back on his own happiness. And he *would* choose that. How could he conceive of doing anything else? Risking his place aboard the ship, his livelihood - *Bev's* livelihood. He could be arrested, imprisoned - worse.

No. Will was certain there was no other option as a sane man but to walk away from Hannibal, from the promise of touch, from the fire beneath his skin. Hannibal would be good at it, that hazy feeling that Will had never truly visualized. He tried, now, just for a moment. If he was going to walk away, he should understand what he was walking away *from*.

Hannibal would... Hannibal would kiss him. That, Will could imagine easily enough. He had kissed Bev before, a fumbling handful of times. He usually kissed her on the cheek now, a softened platonic thing, but he remembered how it felt. And he could still feel Hannibal's lips against his skin...without any effort at all.

Hannibal would kiss him, and Will would feel like he was dying. He would drown in the heat and need of it, immolating from the inside out until, at last, that would be the end of him.

And perhaps...that wasn't so bad? Maybe falling upon the funeral pyre of his own desire would be a better end than the gradual petrification he faced now, the frigid and stoney scales that ensconced his heart spreading with creeping surety until he was entombed in their unforgiving embrace, suffocated not scorched.

Will pressed his palm to his cheek, to his own lips as though he could recreate the smolder of unspoken promise before yanking it away abruptly, a derisive snort leaving him.

No.

He wasn't about to playact kissing a man against his own hand in a lifeboat while his *dog* snored at his side. He wasn't an overwrought *boy* anymore.

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it? Will wasn't a youth, still in the throws of his teenhood, no longer a stupid, dreamy-eyed little thing hoping for a better future than what his life was destined to be - if he ever had been it had died in the smog of the Liverpool docks. Nor was he a waifish little thing in a Paris brothel. He was a grown man - he had a wife, responsibilities with higher stakes. Any year now silver would start its insidious path over his temples and he would look more and more like his father.

Any year now, he might die.

And he'd die without ever knowing, without ever experiencing this illicit fantasy that Hannibal offered him. Because that was all it was: A fantasy. And Will had no time for those, not when he had to claw his way through every day to merely survive.

He didn't deserve fantasies.

He didn't deserve Hannibal.

They were nearly at port, now. Only a few days more. Close enough to taste - close enough that passengers and crew alike began to thrum with restless energy.

They'd be docked for two days while they replenished their wares and swapped out crew. Everyone aboard the *Campania* had one of those days off to do as they pleased. Most would wander the city. Will usually preferred to nap, but if Bev was feeling better, he would have liked to take her window shopping.

He would have time to clear his head, to put all thoughts of Doctor Hannibal Lecter away entirely. He would devote himself to his wife, as any good man would.

He would never hear from the good doctor again - of that, Will was certain. Hannibal knew where to find him at the docks in Liverpool, but he had only been there in the first place to sate a need. A business transaction. Given the crisp, expensive cut of his suit, it was unlikely he spent much time amongst the grease and grime, the fishy smell of the harbor. He was very clearly not from the area. After his stay in New York, however long that would be, he would likely return from whence he came.

And Will would be on the *Campania*, and then in Liverpool. Then the *Campania* again, and so on, and so forth, until the day he died.

The thought pained him.

Going about his duties, Will caught a glimpse of Hannibal down the hall and felt a horrible ache in his chest.

He turned tail and ran.

The third time he saw him- different hall, different part of the ship entirely- Medic betrayed him, yipping happily and waddling over to the Doctor. Will watched as Hannibal knelt, holding out his palm to the animal, before stroking obligingly behind Medic's ears when the dog graciously allowed it.

Will waited with baited breath, waited for Hannibal to look up, to call his name, to walk over, Medic in his arms, rooting Will to the spot, holding his animal hostage...

But Hannibal did no such thing. He looked around until he found Will where he stood and merely raised a hand in greeting, his smile gentle and warm. Will felt his knees grow weak, and raised his own hand in answer, tentative and trembling.

When Medic had taken his due, he trotted back to Will, and Hannibal continued on his way as though nothing had happened.

Perhaps, to him, nothing *had*. He'd offered and Will had declined, throwing himself out the door before Hannibal could get another word in. Perhaps, to him, this had been an offer extended to many, and Will had simply fancied himself special.

Yes.

That's what it was. It had to be.

Will took a breath to steady himself, and turned on his heel to continue on his way, walking right into a steward carrying a pail of water.

Soaked, and apologizing as profusely as the poor steward was, Will excused himself to return to his room to change.

"Damn, Graham," Bev greeted him as he shoved himself through the door. "What, you decided you wanted to give a go at swimming the Atlantic? *Again*?"

Will took a breath and glared, but it was half-hearted at best, Bev's nose wrinkling as she grinned and the small expression softened Will up immediately, shoulders drooping and releasing the tension they'd been holding all day.

"There was a minor collision on the promenade," Will said instead, starting to work his sopping jacket off his shoulders. Medic took a running leap and landed on Bev's bed with an audible *oof*.

"Will, I've seen you navigate the goddamn fish market with your nose in a book and come out without mud on your boots," she reminded him, closing her own book and reaching out to scratch Medic's belly as he grunted happily, "Saw Hannibal, huh?"

No one should ever marry their best friend, Will decided. Matches should be exclusively between enemies, or, at the most, lukewarm acquaintances, lest you bind yourself forever to someone who knew how to read your mind.

“He’s a passenger,” Will deflected, “I’m bound to see him about. As I see everyone.”

“Which is my *job*,” he added, when she looked exceedingly unconvinced.

“And yet, when you see him your heart stutters, doesn’t it?”

Will turned to face her fully, brow furrowed. “You,” he declared, “have been reading *far* too many novels.”

“Not much else to do when the bossman confines you to bed,” she chirped happily. Will couldn’t bring himself to be mad at her, not when she was up and moving so soon after her monthly pains began.

“Hannibal makes me...feel things,” Will conceded, voice dropping to a whisper. He couldn’t help but look around, as if for someone who might be listening in on them, “That does not mean he is something I have a right to.”

“You know, you never actually told me what you two talked about,” Bev pressed, sitting forward and tilting her head. Will narrowed his eyes at her and pointed an accusing finger.

“Don’t.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I have to go back to work now.”

“You need to put on a dry shirt,” Bev countered with a cheshire grin, “And maybe pants, too, unless you want the passengers to think you’ve wet yourself in terror.”

Will groaned and rubbed his face before ceding with a sigh and shucking his trousers as well, tossing it all in a wet muddle by the sink.

“He... confessed his feelings,” Will admitted quietly.

“That’s a good thing, Will,”

“How is that a good thing?”

“Well, for a start, you know it’s reciprocated,” Bev shrugged.

“He doesn’t know it is,” Will reminded her, “I never told him anything.”

“Will, don’t play dumb. You don’t have to say shit. The way you look at him alone, just-”

“If *anyone* finds out, Bev-”

“Will, hey,” Bev peeled back the blankets to get up and Will stepped closer instead, pushing her back into bed, “Calm down, it’s okay, I’m just teasing.”

Will knelt by the bed and grasped her hand, “Bev, if anyone knew, I’d be arrested, imprisoned - hell, hanged maybe. And I can’t leave you, I can’t leave... this. Our life. I won’t squander that chasing something I can’t have, okay?”

Bev set her hands on either side of Will’s face and pressed their foreheads together. For a few minutes they just breathed together, before Bev slid her arms around his neck and hugged him close.

“No one else can tell,” she promised him softly, “I only know ‘cause I know you so well I can read you like a book. If it’s something you want, some *one--*”

“I can’t do that to you.”

“I want you,” Bev interrupted him quietly, pulling back to look at Will properly, “to be happy. If that happiness comes from working the ship, charming the pants off of staff and passengers alike and somehow putting up with my grumpy ass, then good. ‘Cause I ain’t going anywhere. *But...*”

Will bit his lip, knowing not to interrupt when Bev was like this.

“But,” she repeated, “If that happiness comes from spending time with a man who is besotted with you, who makes you feel things,”

“Then?” Will whispered, eyes flicking between Bev’s own.

“Then good,” she smiled, “‘cause I ain’t going anywhere.”

The night Will Graham left him, fleeing his room into the night, Hannibal dreamt of him.

He dreamt of shaking hands, sweaty palms, that reluctant nervousness that colored the very air around Will. It was charming on him. Everything seemed to be charming on Will.

Hannibal dreamt of taking Will to bed, unveiling him piece by piece. Will would be tanned from boat work, taking off his shirt in the hot sun. His hands would be calloused when Hannibal pressed lips to each fingertip.

He would be quiet, stifling noises in his hands, though Hannibal would do his best to coax him into loudness. Not here, where they could be overheard, but at home, in the safety and privacy of Hannibal’s upstairs bedroom.

He would be so like the dear, lithe little things Hannibal had lived his first times with, and yet entirely unlike them. Will wanted to be cared for and coddled, but he was neither delicate nor dainty. His beauty was rugged, a neatly trimmed beard, scars on his skin from years of hard work...

Hannibal awoke hot and hungry. *Hopeful* .

He did not see Will in the dining hall taking breakfast, nor in the first class promenades when Hannibal took his coffee there to watch the water. He told himself not to seek Will out, to grant him space and time to come back on his own.

He was certain that Will would.

He had looked at Hannibal with such yearning, such hunger, that it had been nigh impossible for Hannibal to resist pulling him into an embrace and holding him tight. But Will was a flighty creature, easily frightened off, and untrusting. Hannibal had never lived the life Will had, he couldn't imagine the difficulties, the constant stress of a subsistence existence.

So he would give him time.

He would wait, as he had so promised to do.

Hannibal had been pleasantly surprised when Medic had trotted over to him, and had given the little dog the attention he deserved. When he found Will, standing tense and nervous several paces away, he'd smiled, and Will had smiled back, and that hope that had coiled warm in the pit of Hannibal's belly stretched and settled higher up, heating his heart as well.

The rest of the day Hannibal spent sketching; sitting on the main deck and watching people pass by and interact with each other. He sketched the rigging, he sketched the shadows of the elderly couple leaning over the railing to see the water below, he sketched children playing. He flipped to an empty page of his notebook and started drafting a letter to Bedelia, telling her about Will, about his own aching need to care for him. He could almost hear her voice in his head, chiding him gently, reminding him that not everyone wanted to be coddled.

By the time dinner was served, Hannibal had penned pages and pages to her, answering her unasked questions, faithfully writing his side of their unspoken conversation.

That night, he went to bed with a smile on his face and once more dreamed of *him* .

The Campania was due to dock late afternoon and the energy on board was palpable from the very early morning.

Hannibal enjoyed a light breakfast, packed his bags, made ready to disembark, then took another stroll around the ship...one last time for this trip.

He walked the passageways that Will had shown him that second day, from the third class levels all the way up to first, where Hannibal felt he knew every whirl and knot in the wooden planks beneath his feet with how often he'd paced them. He crouched at the spot where Medic had injured himself, the wood still dark with the blood that had managed to soak into it, and drew his fingertips over the mark.

Hannibal knew that regardless of Will's answer, he could take the *Campania* on his voyage home when it came time to leave America. She was a sturdy ship, reliable and true, and Will loved her.

Will's love was a beautiful, hale thing. Hannibal could see the weight of it, the spiderwebs of support sprawling out over the deck, over Beverly Graham. Will's love held his world together like steady hemp rope, strong and unwavering. He may not have been very certain of himself and his own desires, but Will was entirely steadfast in his affection.

It was part of his appeal, that unique charm that belonged only to Will...and Hannibal had always been a covetous man. He coveted the thickly woven strands of Will's affection. He wanted to bear the weight of Will's attentions, and in turn, he wanted to be the rock that held Will steady, bolstering him up, soothing the wavering worry that so plagued him.

The journey home would be difficult should Will choose not to come to Hannibal, but it would be a safe and trustworthy one. Hannibal would take no other vessel, no matter how long he had to wait for the *Campania* to make port again.

On his way back to his rooms to take final stock of his packing, Hannibal ran into Beverly Graham. She wore oil smudged overalls, one of her suspenders coming undone. She did not seem to have noticed it yet, but a passenger walking by gave her a pinched look of displeasure.

In response, Beverly nodded her head demurely, and then stuck her tongue out once the woman had rounded the corner.

"Don't tell Will," she whispered conspiratorially, "He thinks I need to maintain 'proper decorum' at all times on the ship."

"Your secret is safe with me," Hannibal assured her, "Will likes to make sure everything on the ship runs smoothly. It's an admirable quality, moreso given his position."

"Will is a worrywart," Beverly corrected. She grinned, the corners of her eyes crinkling. She would have laugh lines when she was older, was likely developing them now. Hannibal thought they would make her all the more beautiful. Grease could not dim her charms, and age was unlikely to do so either. Hannibal understood how Will could love her, even if his feelings for her had never blossomed beyond that.

"He is, isn't he?" Hannibal said. "Is there anything we can do to ease his troubles?"

She knew what he was talking about, Hannibal could see it in her eyes. Her smile waned, though not entirely, as concern tugged at the corners.

"Will is what he is," she finally said, "And always will be. The best we can do is wait to see him through it."

She clasped him on the shoulder briefly with her clean hand and was gone, leaving Hannibal to ruminate on the thought.

Guilt stabbed him in an unwelcome prickle as he realized he hadn't asked her how she had been feeling. Better, clearly, since she was on her feet, yet as a doctor it should have been his first point of call. But it had reminded him of something.

People were already abuzz with excitement as the ship approached land. Hannibal had seen it often enough that he didn't stop to look, but the energy seeped into his pores, coaxed his heart into a quickened tempo.

In his room, Hannibal pulled a fresh sheet of paper from his suitcase and wrote out a prescription for cocaine for Mrs. Beverly Graham. On another page, he penned a letter to a colleague of his acquaintance who held a practice in Liverpool, explaining the situation and expressing his desire to cover the expense for any and all pain management prescriptions the Grahams would need. He folded the latter into a separate envelope and addressed it, then retrieved a vial partially filled and a syringe from his medical bag. He sterilized both for good measure before wrapping them in a swath of linen: a dose or two for them to have should the need arise on their journey home.

He would hand off the parcel to one of the staff, with instructions to deliver it to Will as he disembarked.

He wanted to keep every promise he had made to Will Graham, if only to be remembered as a man who did.

The ship's horn sounded and Hannibal looked up, through the window of his room.

They were coming into port, the land beyond the windowpane moving faster now, even as the ship slowed upon its entry to the harbor. Hannibal swallowed. This didn't feel like an ending, but it felt...melancholy. Perhaps he could have asked differently, offered less, so Will might not have been so frightened. Perhaps he should have done just the opposite and shown Will just how much he ached to give him comfort. Perhaps -

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

A knock came at his door, and Hannibal cleared his throat, taking up the parcel in his hands as he moved to open it. He could ask the steward or maid to take it up, buy himself more moments aboard the ship, as though those moments would gain him anything at all.

Beyond the door stood Will Graham. Flushed from exertion, eyes bright and hand still raised as though to knock again. Hannibal blinked, taken by surprise, speechless for a moment.

Outside the window the horn blew again.

"I have a million places to be," Will said, his words coming quickly, tone kept low, "people to see to, things to organize for the disembarking process -"

"I'm certain you'll have your hands full," Hannibal replied, unsure, yet, where the conversation would lead him. He hadn't detained Will as he was passing, Will had come to *him--*

And he came closer now; near enough that anyone glancing down the corridor would be able to see his silhouette, anyone leaving their own rooms would not encounter him in their way.

“Yeah, for...for hours,” Will admitted, chewing his lip, “For the rest of the day, into the night, through all the people and paperwork and *headaches*... but I couldn’t - I *couldn’t* just let you-
_”

A moment, a breath, a heartbeat...and then Will’s hands grasped Hannibal’s lapels to pull him close. They pressed together, touching at each point - lips finding lips, heart beating against heart, hips against hips...and time stood still.

Another burst of the horn broke them apart, and Will’s breath came out in a shaky little laugh that tickled Hannibal’s lips.

“I couldn’t let you go without knowing what that felt like,” he whispered, “At least *once* , at least--”

With that, Hannibal cupped Will’s cheek and kissed him again.

Chapter End Notes

Second book in the works! Soon to come we promise!

End Notes

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